

RETHINKING GENERIC REPRESENTATIONS OF HISTORY:
THE PLACE OF SUBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE IN TERRENCE MALICK'S FILMS

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Abstract

Terrence Malick is recognisable as an auteur not only for the aesthetic beauty of his oeuvre, but also his consistent frustration of traditional narrative modes. This thesis examines the role of genre and gender in Terrence Malick's films. I analyse the role of these elements in *Badlands* (1973), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005) and *The Tree of Life* (2011). Each chapter establishes these films within their respective genres. *Badlands* is read as a hybrid of crime and road films, *The Thin Red Line* as a combat film, *The New World* as a biographical film, and *The Tree of Life* as a coming-of-age film. I then analyse the means through which Malick subverts and revises each genre's conventions. These revisions are often driven by Malick's representation of gender, which has consistently denied traditional genre conventions in its interrogation of male perspectives and the incursion of female perspectives into stereotypically male spaces. The aforementioned films destabilise cinematic conventions through their location within their central characters' subjective perspectives. Malick's depiction of well-known periods within American history represents another subversion in his denial of historical nostalgia. Throughout this thesis, I analyse – with a particular focus on voiceover narration – the various ways in which Malick's idiosyncratic style complicates the spectator's relationship to the cinematic construction of genre, gender and history through its embodiment of subjective perspectives.

Introduction

Terrence Malick's films have consistently shown awareness of cinematic artifice in their engagement with the boundaries between fact and fiction. The director has revised and subverted the conventional characteristics of numerous genres through his idiosyncratic style. This thesis examines the process through which Malick's films deconstruct genres in their evocation of individual perspectives. Through close analysis of Malick's films, I examine the textual strategies that problematise the gendered representations of genre films.

I discuss four of Malick's films and their relationship to genre and gender: *Badlands* (1973), *The Thin Red Line* (1998), *The New World* (2005) and *The Tree of Life* (2011). Three of Malick's released films have been excluded from this analysis. *Days of Heaven* (1978) is not included because it does not foreground genre elements, while *To the Wonder* (2012) and the upcoming *Knight of Cups* (2016) were not readily available at the time research began for this project. The four films I have chosen can be easily located within popular genres, despite their subversions of cinematic conventions. *Badlands* is positioned between the road and crime genres: I focus on the manner in which it disrupts the road and crime genres' conventions through the inclusion of a female perspective. *The Thin Red Line* is a combat film, with the analysis exploring the various textual strategies that Malick mobilises in order to frustrate the spectator's desire for national and masculine identification, thereby offering a critique of the military structure and its de-individuating effect. *The New World* is discussed as a biopic, with its narrative presenting a self-consciously mediated depiction of history that interrogates the archetypally male role, which inhabits the centre of traditional film narratives. *The Tree of Life* is analysed in terms of the coming-of-age genre, and the embodiment of various subjective perspectives despite the narrative's location mostly within the central character's memories. Its various voiceover narrators generate a nostalgically mediated illustration of the past, indicating the artifice of historical construction while

simultaneously critiquing and undermining traditional gender representations. These four films represent distinct genres, but they are united by Malick's tendency to deny the spectator easy identification with generic conventions. Each story takes place during a well-known period – or depicts well-known events – within American history, with Malick's evocation of diverse gendered perspectives destabilising the viewer's perception of hegemonic representations of history. I examine the manner in which Malick's approach to genre complicates the spectator's relationship to filmic representations of history.

Critical background

Lloyd Michaels provides one of the most thorough examinations of Terrence Malick that has been written, going so far as to include a brief biography and two interviews the director gave around the time of *Badlands*.¹ Michaels delivers concise and compelling arguments about Malick's films, as in his assertion that they convey "Malick's romantic ideal of human oneness with nature along with the equally romantic sense that such moments cannot possibly be sustained" (9). His approach regularly associates Malick's work with other art forms, such as his comparison of Holly's voiceover narration to Tom Sawyer's narration in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (Twain 1884). His analysis of *Badlands* in particular, with his assertion that it "remains arguably the most perfectly realised of his four works to date," is impressive in its examination of the film's literary and cinematic influences (20). This text is also important in that although a number of theorists have addressed Malick at various points throughout his career, his oeuvre is rarely viewed as a whole. I explore some of the same topics as Michaels, focusing specifically on the place of Malick's films within the cinematic medium, in terms of both genre and style.

Steven Rybin's *Terrence Malick and the Thought of Film* provides an example of the philosophical inquiry that has defined analysis of Malick's films. He expresses a clear

¹ These interviews are exceedingly valuable, as Malick has avoided giving any since.

understanding of the subjectivity inherent to Malick's films in his assertion that he is not writing about "*the* meaning of Malick's work. Instead, what I want to evoke for the reader are the efforts his characters make to shape their own meaning – efforts that are also valuable points of entry into our own contemplation of the cinematic experiences enabled by these films" (xi). He suggests that Malick's films are rich enough to withstand any number of potential interpretations, with their "value for us, as works, [...] reflected in the textual work that we in turn create, texts generated out of experiences the films enable" (xi). His text is one of the more theoretically rigorous to address the director, even as it underlines its own subjectivity. That quality makes Rybin's work particularly useful in the context of this thesis, although I will take a less explicitly philosophical approach – instead analysing the manner in which Malick's evocation of subjective perspectives disrupts traditional representations of genre and gender.

Film theorist Michel Chion's *The Thin Red Line* also accesses Malick's work through philosophical analysis, carefully tracing various influences on Malick's work, including Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman. There is reference to Malick's life and earlier films, but for the bulk of the text, Chion remains focused on *The Thin Red Line*, specifically on its iteration of isolation in humanity. This is explored largely in relation to the voiceovers, as Chion believes that "the inner voices isolate the characters from each other: those who have them from each other, because they possess them at different times, and those who have them from those who don't" (54-55). Chion contrasts the omnipresence of the voiceover with the relative sparseness of actual dialogue between the men, taking this as an indication of men who have been completely cut off from one another. Although it is necessary to consider the distance between these men – as seen in Chion's interpretation of the voiceover and the numerous unresolved conflicts of opinion that drive the dialogue that does occur – it is impossible to overlook Witt's suggestion that "maybe all men got one big soul [that]

everybody's a part of." *The Thin Red Line*'s multiplicity of contradictory perspectives renders any definitive interpretation of his films impossible. Additionally, although his assertions are largely compelling and pertinent, Chion largely engages specifically with the film's content rather than its construction. Occasionally, he makes a statement related to aesthetics, such as "Malick's mise-en-scène, shooting, and editing emphasise the vulnerability of each [soldier]," but these assertions are rarely backed up with specific examples (34). In contrast, I undertake extensive formal analysis to establish the manner in which Malick's films embody their characters' perspectives and revise cinematic conventions.

James Morrison and Thomas Schur's *The Films of Terrence Malick* engages with Malick's films as aesthetic objects, going so far as to construct an argument about their images signifying only themselves in a reflexive consideration of inevitability. There is a supplementary focus on the circumstances in Malick's life and the films' production. However, this does not preclude the philosophical approach that other authors have used to interpret Malick's films; in their discussion of *Badlands*, the authors state that "pop existentialism especially infuses films of the New Hollywood, which tend to present alienation not as some dread aberration but as an everyday norm, and to treat the theme with a cool, non-judgmental objectivity, or at least what is routinely put forward as such," fitting *Badlands* into a trend of anti-heroes or villains who were not necessarily presented as such to the viewer (14).

Their text also follows the arc of Malick's career, although Morrison and Schur are resistant to engaging fully with *The Thin Red Line*'s more cynical elements, stating that the voiceover narrations are "delivered with real, direct conviction, and they are not counterpointed by action or images, as the voiceovers in *Days of Heaven* and *Badlands* often are" (27). I argue that *The Thin Red Line* consistently counterpoints the perspectives of its characters, forcing them to face the outer reaches of their knowledge and capacity for

survival. However, their readings of Malick's first two features are particularly precise, expertly describing the extent to which they are defined by a "layering of aesthetic distance and emotional directness" (33), as opposed to Malick's later films, which address more overtly spiritual concerns.

I will also analyse the way these perspectives complicate spectator identification due to Malick's refusal to privilege one viewpoint above others. Consequently, a number of theorists examining gender will be employed, including Laura Mulvey, whose "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) is one of the foundational texts of feminist film studies. Mulvey uses psychoanalytic theory in her deconstruction of gendered cinematic representation, claiming that "in their traditional exhibitionist roles women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (62). In this seminal article, Mulvey outlines a system of identification in which the active male protagonist – with whom the audience would identify – drives the narrative, while the passive female is presented as a spectacle for the audience to consume. I use Mulvey – and other gender theorists – to examine the way in which Terrence Malick's films conform to yet subvert hegemonic gender representation. There is an element of conventional construction within Malick's films in that there are active male figures at the centre of each narrative. However, each film complicates our relationship to those figures, whether it is through the frustration of identification, the presentation of the male body as spectacle, or the incursion of female perspectives. "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema" has been contested and updated over the years – including by Mulvey herself – but it provides a lens through which to examine the subversive strategies within Malick's oeuvre.

I position myself in opposition to the assertions of a number of theorists in terms of Malick's representations of various elements, but especially gender. Angela M. Ross's thesis,

which analyses the depiction of Pocahontas in various texts, provides one example of a text whose conclusions will be disputed. Although Ross shows clear familiarity with Malick's oeuvre, her assertion that *The New World* "paints a disturbingly cliché-ridden and historically inaccurate portrait of Pocahontas" ignores the fusion of history and subjectivity that has defined Malick's films (105). Her argument that "it is precisely when looking at political events such as war and colonisation that we should be looking at the political motivations of the people involved" is easily justifiable in most contexts. When applied to Malick, though, it elides the manner in which his films present their characters' perspectives without affirming them, regularly demonstrating the limits of their perspectives in subtle ways. However, the crux of my argument regarding *The New World* – and throughout the thesis as a whole – is that Malick's consistent fixation on the subjective perspectives of his central characters refuses the construction of realist illusion that is associated with classical Hollywood cinema. It is possible that Malick's film "obscure[s] Pocahontas as a historical figure," but it is with the intent of questioning the manner in which history and cinematic narratives have traditionally been constructed in terms of both gender and genre (106).

Texts and approaches

In Chapter One, I examine *Badlands*' subversion of road and crime films, and the discourses that the film mobilises regarding the construction of identity within hegemonic society. Although the film conforms to both genres' iconography, its affectless tone complicates audience identification and engagement with the characters and narrative. That subversion is largely accomplished by the manner in which Malick crafts a space for a female perspective within traditionally male-dominated genres. The configuration of *Badlands*' central characters also questions the active/passive binary which has often governed gendered representations. I place the film within its cultural framework in terms of cinematic history and its 1950s setting. Although the characters are inspired by historical figures, Malick self-

consciously constructs them – and his film’s universe – as a destabilising pastiche of genre conventions. In this context, the iconography of criminality is foregrounded, and so becomes a substitute for identity.

In Chapter Two, I examine *The Thin Red Line*’s consistent frustration of the combat genre’s conventions. Malick’s subversions range from the ideological – such as the lack of patriotic allegiance within its characters – to the structural, such the film’s refusal of audience satisfaction in its insistent deferral of combat. I compare Malick’s film and Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as contemporaneous combat films, using Spielberg’s relatively conventional narrative to highlight Malick’s departures.² I also examine the film in terms of Malick’s nuanced embodiment of numerous perspectives, analysing the way the characters’ perspectives are simultaneously explored and rebuked. The film critiques hegemonic constructions of masculinity and the military hierarchy, which both prevent Malick’s masculine figures from connecting with others. That isolation will be further explored through Malick’s usage of multiple voiceover narrators, a further departure from *Badlands*. *The Thin Red Line*’s often-contradictory meanings – a common feature within Malick’s oeuvre – are conveyed through its characters’ clashing perspectives, which will be analysed in depth.

Chapter Three examines the complex interplay between myth and history in *The New World*. The film finds its place within the biopic genre, with Malick’s embodiment of subjective perspectives articulated through its central lovers and their self-consciously fictionalised romance. The film draws the viewer into the characters’ ahistorical reverie, justifying the obscuring of historical accounts. Following the conclusion of their romance, the film shifts in both tone and emphasis. In this context, I analyse *The New World*’s departure from Malick’s usual focus on male figures, looking at the way in which the film’s story

² Malick did not direct any films between 1978’s *Days of Heaven* and 1998’s *The Thin Red Line*.

reveals itself as the narrative of a Native American woman. Once again, voiceover narration is a key component to the evocation of various conflicting perspectives, and also the mode through which Malick revises the structure of the conventional romance. *The New World* mixes romantic idyll with historical fact in a manner that comments on the impossibility of representing history due to the multitude of conflicting perspectives and accounts.

Chapter Four will address *The Tree of Life* as a culmination of Malick's thematic and stylistic preoccupations. I address the film as a coming-of-age movie, albeit one that has a much broader scope than that genre usually allows. The film combines a family melodrama with a depiction of the universe's creation, rendering a narrative that is simultaneously universal and specific. I connect the film to Impressionism, an early French film movement that attempted to express individual subjectivities. The connection will be articulated through the film's structure and style, analysing the manner in which the film's flashbacks heighten the subjectivity already present within Malick's oeuvre. There is also a critique of traditional gender roles in its presentation of archetypal characters, and the consequent burdens created by societal expectations. The film is technically audacious, conceived on an even broader scope than Malick's other films, but it remains consistent in its exploration of opposed perspectives, forcing the spectator to acknowledge their contradictions and become aware of the world beyond them. *The Tree of Life* also presents Malick's most explicit meditation on religion and spirituality, which I will examine in the context of the film's depiction of faith in crisis.

Although he has made a relatively small number of films, Terrence Malick's work has heavily influenced cinematic history. His idiosyncratic visions consistently convey philosophical questions about the state of humanity and the natural world without offering easy answers. The unconventional usage of multiple, contradictory perspectives is reflexive in its articulation of the constructed nature of all cinematic narratives. This thesis will explore

the manner in which Malick's evocation of subjective gendered perspectives revises genre conventions.

Arrested Development in the Road Movie: The Futile Journey of *Badlands*

Badlands (1973) was filmed in a nearly unprecedented era of creative freedom in Hollywood, at a time when limitations regarding onscreen representation were challenged constantly by American auteurs. This collection of directors is commonly identified as New Hollywood, a movement beginning roughly at the time Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) was released.³ A number of associated directors – including Penn – drew from the French New Wave, which had similarly re-defined the boundaries of screen narratives earlier that decade. Terrence Malick is often identified as being part of the New Hollywood movement, although the relative paucity of his output regularly leaves him under-considered in that context. Nonetheless, his two 1970s films fit easily within New Hollywood's largely male collective of auteurs who interrogated conventional ideas of narrative and masculinity. *Badlands* subverts the road and crime genres through its unconventional narrative structure and gender representations.

Malick's first feature film synthesises elements from crime films and road movies, genres which are heavily associated with American history and mythology. Crime films – especially those that focused on criminals rather than the attempts of law enforcement to capture them – were especially popular before the Motion Picture Production Code began being enforced in the mid-1930s, forcing directors to shy away from the frank depictions of crime that had previously dominated the genre. Genre theorist Nicole Hahn Rafter defines crime films as “films which focus primarily on crime and its consequences” (5). She identifies a wide range of subgenres, including “detective movies, gangster films, cop and prison movies, [and] courtroom dramas” (5). Her definition of crime films – which this thesis follows – demands some form of reflection on “the relationship between crime and society”

³ This era of filmmaking has alternately been referred to as New Hollywood, American New Wave, and New American Cinema.

(6). *Badlands* conforms to these characteristics, but it is equally indebted to the road movie. Celebrated genre theorist and film historian Susan Hayward defines road movies as being “iconographically marked through things such as a car, the tracking shot, wide and wild open space” (335). Road movies also frequently contain social commentary, as film theorist David Laderman argues in saying that the “driving force propelling most road movies [...] is an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique” (1). *Badlands* includes all of the aforementioned aspects of both genres, with the plot depicting Kit and Holly fleeing from justice after committing a murder. *Badlands* is easily identifiable as a hybrid of crime and road movies due to its usage of narrative elements from both genres.

Crime and road movies are also associated in that both genres privilege male perspectives. Crime films’ central characters tend to be male, with female characters generally existing only in relation to male figures. Women were prominent within film noir, but the classical crime genre stereotypically showcased male criminals, playing out the period’s masculine conflicts and crises. Similarly, Laderman’s history of the road movie notes that most films within the genre “retain a traditional sexist hierarchy that privileges the white heterosexual male” (20). The prevalence of male protagonists within film is well-documented, but it is particularly noticeable within certain genres, such as crime and road movies. These movies do not necessarily glorify their protagonists, but men nonetheless occupy the centre of their filmic universes. Crime films in particular tread a fine line between glorifying their central characters’ criminal behaviour and returning to the status quo of social acceptability, typically by showing the gangsters’ downfall. Kit is in many ways typical of these genres’ protagonists in his status as a white heterosexual male who drives the narrative forward, but the manner in which *Badlands* subverts gendered representation will be explored in depth later in the chapter. *Badlands* superficially conforms to the gendered representations that have traditionally governed crime and road movies.

The centrality of masculinity and the rejection of social norms allow crime and road films to critique hegemonic society. These genres often contain elements of social consciousness and commentary; the crime film often chronicles a rise to power from a low social class, while the journeys undertaken in road movies are often instigated by some desire to escape oppressive societal forces, perceived or otherwise.⁴ Consequently, both genres consider the manner in which people define themselves in relation to society's laws and customs. *Badlands* embodies this element in that its characters – as Adam Duncan Harris's thesis notes – “live in small towns, fill roles of minor importance, and are characterised by a desire for an identity that would lead them to be somebody in the eyes of the world” (21). Harris positions criminality as a stand-in for identity in a world where fame and notoriety have become important for their own sake, and people are insignificant without public attention. Kit in particular is defined by his desire for fame and attention, seeking it without regard for potential consequences. His motivations are frequently opaque, but his lack of success within hegemonic society – here indicated by his occupation as a garbage collector – hints at class-based resentments. At one point, he says, “Most people don't have anything on their mind at all, do they?” His words demonstrate a kind of intellect-based condescension not normally associated with workers of his class, which is a further indicator that Kit cannot be read solely as a product of rigid environmental circumstances. As *Badlands*' central character, Kit continues a tradition of male protagonists in both crime and road movies, with his low social status at least partially motivating his actions.

Malick's counterposing of images and narration subverts the conventions and typical tone of crime and road movies. Despite familiar genre elements, Malick consistently undermines these genres' narratives. The voiceover narration regularly negates the onscreen

⁴ Nicole Hahn Rafter's *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* and David Laderman's *Driving Visions: Exploring the Road Movie* provide context regarding societal critique in the crime and road film, respectively.

events, intentionally giving them an impotent, unsatisfying feeling. Early in the film, Holly states in voiceover, “Little did I realise that what began in the alleys and back ways of this quiet town would end in the badlands of Montana.” Her words do not reveal the narrative entirely— although film-literate spectators can surely guess its endpoint – but their feeling of inevitability strips it of suspense. Narration is also used to undermine tension within sequences. Laderman observes that Kit’s final car chase with the police “achieves a furious energy with remarkable traveling shots and a dynamic crosscutting montage of both cars speeding down the highway and over off-road terrain” (124). Although the sequence is crafted in a manner that would ordinarily generate tension, Laderman’s analysis excludes Holly’s voiceover narration from the middle of the sequence, in which she says, “Many times I’ve wondered what went through Kit’s head before they got him.” Her words render the chase dramatically redundant, specifically declaring its conclusion and thereby deflating the suspense that chase sequences ordinarily strive for. *Badlands*’ voiceover narration undermines its dramatic action in a manner which denies the tension that drives road and crime movies.

Malick’s deconstruction of genre extends beyond the voiceover narration, with the crime sequences presented in the same register of banal detachment as the characters. During a confrontation with Holly’s father (Warren Oates) in her home, Kit asks the older man, “Suppose I shoot you? How’d that be?” The man disregards Kit’s threat, declaring his intent to turn him over to the authorities before walking away. Kit follows him down the staircase and shoots him twice. There is a mid-shot of Holly’s father while he is being shot (**Shot 1.1**), before Malick cuts back to Kit firing his weapon (**Shot 1.2**) and Holly running down the stairs (**Shot 1.3**). By this time, Holly’s father has fallen to the floor, clutching his stomach (**Shot 1.4**). The scene’s brief duration – unfolding in a matter of seconds – refuses any acceleration of tension, in much the same way that Holly’s voiceover undermines the tension

of the later car chase. Further, the lack of musical accompaniment reinforces the flat, affectless atmosphere that makes it difficult to engage with the onscreen events. Additionally, Martin Sheen and Sissy Spacek's minimalist performances deny any sensationalism and frustrate desire for conventional conflict. Spacek's performance conveys a level of emotional distress when she slaps Kit following the murder, but otherwise there is no significant conflict between the two. In complete contrast to their implacability, Oates's contorted expression is closer to the realm of slapstick comedy. Both performance styles – minimalism and excess – represent significant departures from classical Hollywood realism, with their juxtaposition further challenging the audience's ability to invest in the film's narrative. The lack of affect is even more pronounced considering that the death of Holly's father provides the narrative's turning point, after which the film's genre elements begin in earnest. That flatness of tone mirrors the central characters' disengaged reactions. Film journalist Ryan Gilbey remarks that Malick "has prepared us for the drabness of death; how it blends into the background while the rest of life carries on; how it isn't necessarily announced by an orchestral crescendo or a lightning bolt" (80). Gilbey broadly surveys New Hollywood films without much in the way of stylistic analysis, but his conclusion here is astute. Instead of a tragedy or a tension-laden set piece, death in *Badlands* is staged with the same listless shrug as the rest of the narrative. Malick presents a universe where human life has no inherent meaning, which ties directly into Kit's characterisation. Malick scholar Hannah Patterson's exploration of *Badlands* explains that "Kit performs the extreme act of killing as a way of attempting to draw attention to himself and more fully assert a sense of his own identity" (28). Her argument recalls Harris's assessment of fame and criminality in *Badlands*. Both authors indicate the way in which Malick shifts the narrative's emphasis from action to reaction; Kit's actions become insignificant except in relation to how spectators – within the film's narrative or audience – respond to them. In that sense, his motivations recall those of

classical gangsters, who also harmed others in pursuit of greater glory. What sets Kit apart is that those characters generally pursued power or wealth, while Kit only desires attention and notoriety. *Badlands* deflation and revision of genre conventions serves its depiction of Kit's desperate search to attain meaning in an affectless universe.

Kit and Holly are consistently presented as self-conscious constructions.

Traditionally, spectators are meant to relate to a narrative's central figures, or at least understand their motivations. In complete contrast to this tendency, Kit and Holly are never rendered explicable. The two are not poorly written, but intentionally presented as artificial constructs. In the same way that Malick's deconstruction of genre conventions denies traditional spectator engagement, Kit and Holly never become figures of identification, existing only in the barest of ways. The most prominent distancing technique is Holly's voiceover narration. Voiceover narration typically underlines narrative elements while simultaneously explaining a character's perspective. Gilbey analyses *Badlands*' unconventional narration, noting that Holly "never departs from the stark facts, the barest observations, and some brief flourishes of movie-speak [...] delivered in a monotone voice that stifles all possibility of excitement" (83). Spacek's monotone delivery is juxtaposed to the narrative's life-and-death stakes, with references to murder and the renegade couple's love affair dulled by Holly's marked lack of emotion. Additionally, her voiceover contains blatant contradictions, as when she says, "The day was quiet and serene, but I didn't notice." Superficially, Holly satisfies the archetype of a bored small-town girl, but her narration reveals her character's darker aspects. In particular, it highlights her casual disregard for human life, as when she casually muses that "at times I wished he'd fall in the river and drown, so I could watch." Kit's actions are more overtly dangerous, but his banal dialogue rarely betrays that danger. He regularly utters lines like "Somebody dropped a paper bag on the sidewalk. If everybody did that, the whole town'd be a mess." The line is consistent with

his occupation, but it does nothing to illuminate his inner self. Kit and Holly rarely interact in any meaningful way, even as they declare their love for one another; their conversations largely consist of non-sequiturs that indicate a complete lack of personal connection. Holly's meandering voiceover and Kit's banal observations revise traditional representation, with Malick denying spectator identification.

Malick's subversion of genre and character construction presents a critique not only of genre, but of cinema as a means of conveying reality. *Badlands* is a reflexive meditation on its characters' construction and artificiality, themes which can easily be extended to cinema itself. Malick repeatedly draws attention to the flatness of his characters and scenario, for, as Harris points out, "one of the goals of *Badlands* is to show us how it, as a film, is related to the whole system of image creation" (12). Harris articulates a separation between the film's narrative and its approach – particularly in its voiceover – that "opens the door for questions about other possible versions of the story or what 'really' happened" (12). That awareness of subjective perspectives is often articulated visually, as when Kit talks to Holly's father while the older man paints a billboard advertising "Kauzer's Feed and Grain" (**Shot 1.5**). The image generates a dichotomy between the natural landscape's three-dimensional "reality" and the constructed billboard's two-dimensional artifice. The billboard is not only self-consciously a fiction, emphasised by Holly's father painting while he talks to Kit, but also an idealisation. Its colours are vivid and idyllic, as indicated by features such as the bright yellow barn and the free-roaming chickens. It is not an objective depiction, but a romanticised representation, designed to sell a product. The advertisement's utopian imagery suggests the manner in which people construct and interpret the world around them. *Badlands* encourages meditation on artifice, undermining not only its characters but also the artifice of the medium through which they are presented. That is regularly accomplished through the dissonance between the content of Holly's voiceover and the images shown concurrently.

Holly details her romance with Kit through voiceover narration, briefly mentioning that he works at a feed lot while she studies, with the image track alternately subverting and affirming the tone of her voiceover. Her declaration that “Little by little, we fell in love” is underscored by an image of Kit at work (**Shot 1.6**), creating a striking dissonance between the romantic tone of her words and the connotations of physical labour and entrapment seen within the image. The subsequent image of Holly running towards Kit’s car (**Shot 1.7**) adheres to a romantic narrative’s conventional imagery. However, the narrative quickly returns to Kit’s work, linking a sick cow (**Shot 1.8**) to Holly’s romantic voiceover. The visual association does not necessarily demand a metaphorical connection between the two elements, but it contests the romantic tone the narration might have generated otherwise. *Badlands* foregrounds subjective perspectives in constructed narratives in order to expose and implicitly critique cinematic artifice.

Badlands’ lack of verisimilitude indicates a commentary on significance and meaning. The narrative recalls the factual account of Charles Starkweather and Caril Ann Fugate’s killing spree in Midwestern American states in the 1950s. Details of Fugate’s involvement vary widely, but her attachment to Starkweather is a certainty. The ambiguity surrounding their story mirrors *Badlands*, where it is suggested by the media that Holly is the driving force in their crimes, despite her claims that these perceptions are incorrect. However, as Steven Rybin observes in his philosophical study of Malick’s work, the film’s narrative “shares only superficial similarities with the actual events, and it mounts no sociological analysis” (38). Rybin’s first point is accurate: *Badlands* uses Starkweather and Fugate’s story as a broad template for its own narrative. However, there is sociological analysis inherent within the film’s defiantly affectless nature, and the public’s fascination with Kit. If interpreted as a recreation of historical events or a construction of plausible characters within a fictional scenario, *Badlands* must be taken as a failure. Malick offers no definitive

explanation for his characters' motivations, instead locating them largely within the framework of genre films. However, their emptiness generates a critique not only of genre conventions, but also of the societal circumstances that created them. Although Kit is regularly portrayed as ridiculous, it is impossible to fully dismiss his class-based resentments, which creates an association with extra-textual discourses regarding crime. In their analysis of Malick's oeuvre, James Morrison and Thomas Schur argue that *Badlands*' characters are "significant neither as menaces to social welfare nor as representatives of social pathology. Their pertinence seems more directly existentialist; what they manifest is [...] a reduction in significance itself" (17). Both Morrison and Schur and Rybin's studies highlight *Badlands*' ahistoricism, positing a "distinct indifference to the social-problem dimensions of the material" (Morrison and Schur 17). These readings – aside from reducing the weight of the film's class-based commentary – elide the manner in which the emptiness of the characters and their universe can *itself* be read as a reaction to a perceived shift within the American consciousness, gutted in the final throes of the Vietnam War. Kit and Holly's lack of depth not only indicates the absence of significance within a 1970s America emerging from an unpopular and unsuccessful war, but also constitutes a reflexive meditation on previous representations of criminality, such as Jean-Luc Godard's circumspect character Michel Poiccard in the New Wave classic, *Breathless* (*À bout de souffle*, 1960). *Badlands* approaches character in the same way that it approaches genre conventions, denying the audience's expectation of relatable characters in order to provoke distance and thought.

Kit's plagiaristic construction of identity strips away any authentic semblance of self. By any account, Kit is largely unremarkable aside from his criminal actions. As Gilbey asserts, he is "fuzzy and indistinct, a puppet of the various contradictory values which he has accumulated" (80). His identity is comprised largely of intertextual reference points, aped in the misguided belief that they will earn him a more substantial identity. Rybin explores the

centrality of self-definition within Malick's oeuvre, noting the tendency to demonstrate "the efforts his characters make to shape their own meaning" (xi). That theme is rendered most cynically in *Badlands*, which suggests Kit's artificial persona and his inner vacuity.

Throughout the film, Kit constructs his own mythology as a rebel outlaw, as when he introduces himself by saying "Name's Kit. I shoot people every now and then. Not that I deserve a medal." His dialogue recalls Warren Beatty's performance as Clyde Barrow, and that actor's confidence when he declares "We rob banks." *Bonnie and Clyde* lingers somewhere between the French New Wave's deconstruction and classical Hollywood's myth-making. Clyde is an antihero, but he is also presented as a psychologically complex and explicable figure. In contrast, Kit consistently embellishes his own mythology in a manner that foregrounds his artificiality. His costume indicates that his primary role model is James Dean, one of the most famous celebrities of his – or any - era. Malick encourages the association from the opening minutes, when Holly says, "He was handsomer than anybody I'd ever met. He looked just like James Dean." Harris elaborates on the reference's significance, noting that Dean "provides a good looking rebel image with which Kit understandably would like to connect himself. James Dean is of course not only a handsome rebel, but a celebrity, living the high-life, ending that life in an immortalising death" (74). Kit finds a role model in Dean, and self-consciously models himself after the performer and others such as Jean-Paul Belmondo's portrayal of the aforementioned Michel Poiccard. There is another possible reference within Kit in Kit Carson, an American frontiersman who lived in the 19th century. That connotation only builds on the film's timelessness, with the invocation of Carson suggesting a further grounding in American history and mythology. Yet beyond these multiple intertextual reference points that invoke the history of film, *Badlands* exudes a sense of timelessness. In a rare interview, Malick said that he "tried to keep the 1950s to a bare minimum. [...] I wanted the picture to be set up like a fairy tale, outside time,

like *Treasure Island*. I hoped this would, among other things, take a little of the sharpness out of the violence but keep its dreamy quality” (Michaels 105). In this context, the numerous references to James Dean are not an evocation of the film’s period setting, but the celebrity’s “immortalising death.” Ultimately, though, Kit’s attempts to construct himself in the image of popular culture are indicative of his fundamental emptiness. At one point, Holly claims that Kit “faked his signature whenever he used it, to keep people from forging important documents with his name.” Holly’s words are the ultimate indictment of Kit’s falseness, wherein an action that would ordinarily verify an individual’s identity is framed as another performative act. *Badlands* constructs a world where identity is supplanted by fame, with Kit grasping at notoriety in an attempt to disguise his own vacuity.

Kit is repeatedly compromised in his simultaneous desire for and rejection of societal conventions. Rybin notes that Kit and Holly “attempt to achieve some respite by absconding to spaces that exist apart from the kinds of codified spaces represented in her father’s painting” (50). Rybin pinpoints the tendency of Malick’s non-conformist characters to perceive the natural world as a utopian haven. That narrative is present within *Badlands*, as Kit and Holly attempt to escape the consequences of their actions by fleeing civilisation. However, *Badlands*’ natural landscapes are the most compromised of Malick’s career in their inextricable connection to society, with images repeatedly associating nature and culture (**Shot 1.9**). The natural world is consistently mediated within the film’s images, such as the one in which Holly’s father is shown painting (**Shot 1.5**) and an image that hangs in Holly and Kit’s settlement (**Shot 1.10**). These artificial representations force the spectator to question the supposedly “natural” world the characters are shown within. Even during their ostensible retreats from human society, Kit and Holly force their surroundings to conform to the image of conventional living spaces (**Shot 1.11**). *Badlands* regularly figures society as an externally oppressive force, but Kit and Holly’s constant manipulation of the natural world

also posits it as an internalised state. Malick indicates Kit's internalisation of societal values when he expresses his love for Holly by saying, "If I could sing a song about the way I feel right now, it'd be a hit." His words elide Holly's perspective in their focus on public response; even in his most intimate moments, Kit presents his sentiments through the lens of spectacle and public perception. Kit's simultaneous rejection of and aspiration to societal norms is the contradiction that defines him; he resents his place in the world, even as he aspires to conform to the society that will not accept him. One of the film's darkest elements is that Kit cannot enjoy the notoriety he desired until his capture, when he talks to a large audience who seem enraptured by his comments. Even so, the mystique surrounding him is punctured when one of the police officers says "Hell, he ain't no taller than I am." The previously-limited exposure to public opinion isolates the outlaws and prevents their actions from being glorified. Although Kit's violence helps him achieve the notoriety he seeks, it is clear that his celebrity will be short-lived, and his fascinated audience will soon move on to the next criminal. *Badlands* figures society both as an oppressive external force and an aspirational internal force, driving people to ridiculous lengths to gain fleeting celebrity.

Although Kit and Holly superficially fill the archetypes of outlaws and star-crossed lovers, Malick increasingly foregrounds the gulf between their perspectives. The two of them display irreconcilable viewpoints – Kit in his attitudes towards fame and society, Holly in her contradictory embrace of both apathy and romance – but their affectless natures initially prevent spectators from seeing their differences. *Badlands* initially presents a largely conventional hybrid of crime and road movies – albeit off-beat in characterisation – but it gradually warps those genres' narrative conventions. Kit and Holly declare their love for each other, but as Morrison and Schur perceptively observe, "Kit wants to be James Dean, and Holly thinks she's living in a romance novel – and the relative coolness of the treatment comes in part from a sense that such aspirations of fancies are more common than not" (73).

They capture the fundamental disconnection between Kit and Holly, which posits the two characters as living within different worlds. Kit espouses self-determination and individualism, while Holly claims to believe in a kind of grand, romantic union. Her nature is indicated through the voiceover's romantic proclamations, although these are rarely followed through in any meaningful way. Despite regular references to their love, there is seldom physical evidence of that connection in their interactions. Midway through the film, Holly disengages from the relationship. She says, "He needed me now more than ever, but something had come between us. I stopped even paying attention to him; instead I sat in the car and read a map and spelled out entire sentences with my tongue on the roof of my mouth where nobody could read them." The inaccessibility of Holly's inner life – as connoted by those sentences unknown to both Kit and the spectator – reinforces the film's commentary about human perspectives and isolation. Her disengagement and silence highlights the distance between individuals, and the impossibility of sharing another person's perspective. Kit and Holly are both hollow, broken people, but their diametrically opposed perspectives leave them unable to relate to one another on any meaningful level. *Badlands* uses the considerable distance between Kit and Holly's perspectives to dramatise the impossibility of truly knowing another person.

Malick's configuration of Holly and Kit's relationship affirms and subverts conventional modes of gender representation. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's seminal "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) notes that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (62). Mulvey outlines cinema's gender representation, noting that male characters tend to drive narratives, while female characters are often constructed as spectacle for male audience members and male characters. *Badlands* fulfils Mulvey's conception of narrative progression in that Kit is the active figure, driving the narrative

through his violent actions. However, Malick's film complicates traditional identification in that Kit is the character who desires Holly's – and by extension, the audience's – gaze. Holly states that Kit dreads “the idea of being shot down alone [...] without a girl to scream out his name.” From Kit's fame-obsessed perspective, nothing is meaningful without an audience, and he perceives Holly as the ideal spectator. Their dynamic places Kit in a role that fulfils Mulvey's conception of both masculine and feminine representation, as he actively drives the plot while also being presented as a spectacle. Mulvey describes a system of power that is produced when the spectator “projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (63). That dynamic is not operative in *Badlands*, which does not insist on the spectator identifying with either of its central figures, but does tie them more closely to Holly through her voiceover narration. Prominent film theorist Kaja Silverman asserts that voiceover narration is “the exclusive prerogative of the male voice within Hollywood film, while the female voice is confined to the ‘inside’ of the narrative” (76). In itself, then, Holly's narration subverts the usual modes of gendered representation with the Hollywood film, particularly in road and crime movies, which have been established as particularly male-dominated. Malick scholar Anne Latta's examination of *Badlands*' narration eventually concludes that Holly's “expressionless tone of voice” and “moral vacuity” “prevent an affective identification or allegiance to her” (91). While it is true that *Badlands*' performance style and narrative content problematise identification, it is crucial that Holly and Kit are *both* presented as affectless, imposing a degree of equality between them. Further, Kit's voice is figured as passive and ineffectual, as when he ends the recording he makes before he and Holly flee her father's murder with the words, “That's the end of the message. I ran out of things to say.” The impotence of Kit's voice compared to the omnipresence of Holly's narration positions her as an active character,

guiding the viewer through the film's diegetic universe, despite her lack of participation within narrative events.

Holly and Kit's eventual separation indicates the incompatibility of their outlooks and subverts the crime genre's conventions. In her definition of the crime genre, Hayward describes "the woman who is romantically involved with the protagonist and in whose arms he (often) dies" (175). Holly fills that role within *Badlands*' first half before growing increasingly disillusioned and leaving Kit. Their relationship initially seems mutually beneficial, with Holly fulfilling Kit's desire to be viewed, while he provides the attention she claims to miss. Holly's narration states that after her mother's death, her father "could never be consoled by the little stranger he found in his house," words which evoke a childhood lacking in emotional intimacy. She regularly makes sweeping statements about love, such as that she only wants to find "someone who loves me." Even at their closest, though, there is an obvious disconnection between their desires, as seen when she states, "He wanted to die with me, and I wanted to be in his arms forever." Her romantic aspirations clash directly with Kit's desire to be martyred, the hero of his narrative. Their relationship falters without explanation and ends abruptly, with no suggestion of closure between them. The juxtaposition between Holly's alleged romantic ideals and her sudden disengagement from Kit, who she regularly claims to love, introduces an additional element of unreliability. It is impossible to verify any of her narration's claims, which further distances the spectator from the characters. The dissolution of their relationship signifies Holly disavowing her previously passive role, refusing the gendered expectations that drive genre narratives. Holly's separation from Kit defies the crime genre's conventions, suggesting the fictitiousness inherent to the archetype of the criminal's loyal girlfriend. Holly's disengagement from Kit is further emphasised by her voiceover narration. The technique underlines Kit and Holly's disconnection; even as she becomes uncommunicative and distant with Kit, she tells her story articulately and at length

to the spectator. As previously discussed, Holly is a bystander within the narrative, which is apt given Kit's perception of her as his audience. Her most significant act of agency is refusing to accompany Kit before the final police chase, removing herself from the narrative. However, it is important to consider the way the two characters are figured: Kit drives the narrative, but he is confined to his role as a character, while Holly's passivity is belied by her position as narrator, making her an active participant in the film's storytelling. The two are separated not only by their relationship's eventual breakdown, but also by their respective places within the film.

Their dynamic also presents a subversive treatment of gender. In analysing *Vertigo* (Hitchcock, 1958), Mulvey states that the female lead's "exhibitionism" and "masochism" make her "an ideal passive counterpart to Scottie's active sadistic voyeurism" (66). Kit's active aggression is consistent with representation of males in cinema, but his desire to be viewed borders on masochistic exhibitionism, an internalisation of a state typically attributed to female characters. These aspects are inextricably bound up in each other, as his passive desire to be viewed leads to his active position at the centre of the narrative. The aforementioned impotence of Kit's voice leaves bodily violence as his only mode of expression. Morrison and Schur compare Malick to David Lynch, "whose movies often concern the role of violence as the only form of sincerity left in the postmodern world" (77). The comparison between the two directors is intuitive – especially when considering *Badlands* – as Lynch's films also address the nature of violence not only in the "postmodern world," but also in a mythic version of America. Kit's actions are an attempt to reject hegemonic societal standards, declaring his intention of following his own path. They are complicated by his recycling of societal archetypes, but his contempt for society remains obvious. In contrast, Holly's passivity fulfils a conventionally female role, but she also expresses the narrative's voice. The aforementioned contradictions raise questions of

unreliability, but Holly's narration is thematically consistent with her eventual decision to leave Kit in its suggestion of someone who is capable of shaping their own narrative. Her agency is contrasted against Kit, who tries – and fails – to play out an internalised cultural narrative. Kit and Holly's eventual separation is reflected within the film's form, as they are confined to the film's narrative and its voiceover storytelling, respectively, without ever confining them to the gendered roles which govern cinematic representation.

Badlands presents its characters with moments of transcendence despite its cynicism. One of the film's most euphoric moments occurs within the intersection of nature and culture, as Holly and Kit dance while listening to "Love is Strange" (Bo Diddley) on the radio shortly after fleeing from society. The scene only comprises around twenty seconds of screen time, and it is inconsequential in terms of the narrative, but it fleetingly presents the characters as uncompromised by their surroundings or actions. The lyrics heard during the scene are "Love is strange, lot of people take it for a game." Immediately following that scene, Holly admits to a fantasy of watching Kit drown. Her words take the latter half of the song's lyrics to a heightened extreme, complicating our perception of their relationship and reinforcing the previous scene as a brief utopian idyll. For a moment, though, the couple find peace away from the pressures of society – with the presence of the radio (**Shot 1.12**) both connecting them to civilisation and reminding the spectator what they have left behind – in one of the few scenes where nature and culture organically intertwine. The scene gains even more resonance when contrasted against the later, more sombre scene when Holly and Kit dance in the darkness while their car's radio plays "A Blossom Fell" (Howard Barnes, Harold Cornelius, and Dominic John), which includes the lyric "The dream has ended, for true love died." Escape is impossible for the pair, with human interference inscribed in every frame, whether it is the intrusion of outsiders or the jumbled synthesis of nature and culture that makes up the settlements they construct (**Shot 1.10-1.11**). Kit and Holly's goals are never

entirely clear, as Kit simultaneously desires and disavows society. However, even while the pair attempt to hide in nature, man-made constructions make unmediated escape impossible. Kit desires fame and scrutiny, but his actions make it impossible for him to escape society's scrutiny. *Badlands* is the film where Malick comes closest to making an unequivocally negative statement about human interaction with nature, largely because it is his only narrative that never shows humans living harmoniously outside of society. Here, humans are fallen figures, too caught up in their own perspectives to truly engage with the world around them, and unable to reconnect with nature, which presents the possibility for meaning that is absent in society. *Badlands* reflects its characters' apathetic attitudes, while allowing for transcendence at the intersection of nature and culture.

Badlands' examination of identity and artifice simultaneously critiques a society that values notoriety over substance and subverts any expectation of personal development within the characters. As Harris states, Kit has internalised "a system where media attention is the only signifier of a valued identity" (33). Within the affectless universe that Malick has constructed, Kit's rejection of societal norms makes him into a minor celebrity, for however short a time. Even at its conclusion, though, the film refuses to glorify him. Patterson compares Malick's characterisation of Kit and Holly, concluding that "it is by virtue of the fact that Kit has become less opaque – more conspicuously at ease with his role as criminal – that we know he has achieved a stronger sense of identity and because Holly remains as unclear – enigmatic and impenetrable – that we infer she has not" (38). Patterson reaches this conclusion by observing Kit's ease within the archetypal criminal role upon his capture, and the relative lack of attention that is paid to Holly compared to Kit after their arrest. However, her analysis of how Kit and Holly's personas "may or may not have shifted" (38) fails to account for the final scenes' subtle suggestion that Kit has not developed personally at all. When Kit is fired from a job toward the start of the film, he throws the workplace's keys in a

water-filled barrel. That petty action is repeated when he dumps Holly's belongings in another barrel at the film's conclusion, an act of revenge motivated by her refusal to stay with him. Kit's actions indicate his personal stagnation, rebuffing the principle of self-discovery that governs the road movie. The attention he commands at the film's conclusion does indicate that he has successfully constructed himself within archetypes of criminality, but it suggests nothing of his actual identity. Malick denies genre-based expectation of personal development, simultaneously critiquing criminality and the society that consumes criminal acts as spectacle.

Badlands' final scene presents Holly in a manner that emphasises her agency both visually and aurally. Kit and Holly are escorted aboard a plane, presumably to be taken into custody. She recites her final voiceover narration as they board, stating that "Kit and I were taken back to South Dakota. They kept him in solitary, so he didn't have a chance to get acquainted with the other inmates." She goes on to wrap up the narrative's loose ends, stating that Kit was given the death penalty and that she married the son of the lawyer who represented her during the trial. Holly's narration functions similarly here as it did earlier in the film, but it is even more striking in that there is no visual representation of the events she describes. That decision provides her voice with an even greater degree of power than it held throughout the film's narrative. There is some brief conversation on the plane, but Holly is silent. She is shown looking out the window (**Shot 1.13**) before Malick cuts to show her point of view (**Shot 1.14**) in the film's final shot. Morrison and Schur refer to the final scene as featuring "fanciful and laconic images of aerial ascent that have a stark, recessionary effect" (63). Disregarding the voiceover for a moment, "fanciful" and "laconic" are two words that perfectly summarise Holly within the film's narrative. Although Morrison and Schur make no explicit reference to Holly, the images explicitly locate the viewer within her perspective. Silverman refers to the cinematic tendency to present the "male subject [in] a position of

apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech, vision, or hearing” (ix). Within *Badlands*’ final scene, Holly demonstrates mastery of both speech and vision, with the film’s style specifically inhabiting her perspective. Although *Badlands* is located within two genres that traditionally marginalise women, it creates a space for female subjectivity in its subversion of genre and gender norms.

Re-envisioning Masculinity and the Military: Sounds and Silence in *The Thin Red Line*

Following *Days of Heaven*'s 1978 release, Terrence Malick took an extensive hiatus from directing. His eventual return came with his adaptation of James Jones's 1962 novel, *The Thin Red Line*, (1998), which was previously adapted into a relatively conventional combat film by Andrew Marton in 1964. All three versions of the narrative depict a fictionalised version of the Battle of Mount Austen, a World War II conflict. The film resembles *Badlands* in numerous ways, but it also represents a significant departure from Malick's earlier work, as well as from conventional combat films. Images of the natural world – and an examination of the way humans interact with it – remain central to *The Thin Red Line*. It also shares *Badlands*' emphasis on tone and characterisation over narrative. Its major departures come in the film's location within of the combat genre, and the consequently increased focus on masculinity. Instead of focusing on a handful of characters, Malick's film portrays the subjective perspectives of numerous American soldiers, while still leaving room for brief incursions of external perspectives. Regardless, the film retains Malick's subversion of typical modes of representation in its complication of genre conventions and gender norms. In the following chapter, I use Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as an example of a conventional combat film in order to establish Malick's genre revisions. The *Thin Red Line* problematises representations of masculinity and the military in its deconstruction of combat film conventions, evoking a multiplicity of contradictory perspectives and constructing an anti-war combat film.

The conventional American combat film conforms to classical Hollywood filmmaking in its craft and its implicit – and often explicit – affirmation of American values. Combat films have long been a significant part of American culture, winning the equivalent

to today's Best Picture award in two of the first three Academy Award ceremonies.⁵ The combat film occupies a particularly rarefied place in American culture as one of the few genres – along with the Western – that directly engages with American history, identity and mythmaking. Jeanine Basinger's survey of the World War II combat film identifies some of the genre's common characteristics, such as "the hero, the group of mixed ethnic types [...], the objective they must accomplish, their little mascot, their mail call, their weapons and uniforms" (16). American combat films are mostly recounted from the perspective of American characters, showing the effort to overcome enemy forces, regardless of affiliation or nationality. During World War II, the prevalence of war-related films – whether they were direct depictions of combat or not – indicated the war's cultural significance. Basinger outlines the questions that underlined combat films, such as "Could we win it? What would we have to do to win? What was each individual's responsibility in the fight? We all would have to do our part – whether in combat or on the home front – but how?" (79). There was a brief decline in the number of films depicting the war following its conclusion, as these questions became less urgent, but many later representations retain the tone of wartime films, evoking the sense of a country uniting righteously against a common enemy.⁶ Basinger refers to World War II as "the combat that speaks to the American soul," suggesting a variety of possible explanations for the World War II combat film's prominence (81). Regardless of the reason, that period occupies a particularly elevated place in the American consciousness, even today. Traditional combat films provide opportunities to see a country reflecting on its decisions through conventional cinematic means.

⁵ F.W. Murnau's *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans* (1927) won the award "Unique and Artistic production" at the 1st Academy Award ceremony, while William A. Wellman and Harry D'Abbadie D'Arrast's *Wings* (1927) – a war film – won "Outstanding Picture." The former award was later discontinued, while the latter went on to become known as "Best Picture." The next war film to win the award – then titled "Outstanding Production" – was *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Milestone, 1929) at the 3rd Academy Awards.

⁶ Basinger notes that only one major release between February 1946 and November 1949 could qualify as a World War II combat film (153). Regular releases within that genre began again after this respite, but there is a clear post-war fatigue regarding combat films.

Shifting social attitudes toward historical events account for the variations of perspective seen in cinematic representations of wars. Malick's approach to *The Thin Red Line* is tonally inconsistent with most World War II films, presenting the war in an ambivalent manner. Tibe Patrick Jordan's thesis compares *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan*, noting that "several mainstream reviewers remarked that *The Thin Red Line* seemed like more of a Vietnam film than a World War Two film" (42). Even in narrative terms, *The Thin Red Line* is distinct from most World War II films in that the Americans are fighting Japanese instead of German soldiers. Jordan's argument makes it clear that there is a distinction between the tone and narrative content of World War II and Vietnam War films. As a war that divided its country and led to extensive criticism of American actions, Vietnam War narratives are defined by their cynicism toward war and a refusal to construct the central figures as heroic. For example, Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) refigures Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) as a Vietnam War narrative that depicts America just as much at war with itself as any other country. *Full Metal Jacket* (Kubrick, 1987) emphasises conflicts within the American military in its depiction of a drill instructor driving a Private to suicide through his overbearing training. It also expresses the war's inherent contradictions, with the main character's helmet bearing a peace symbol and the words "Born to Kill." *The Thin Red Line* resembles these films, with soldiers having little sense of community, and rarely expressing any patriotic sentiment. Malick's narrative incorporates the cynicism and ambiguity of Vietnam War narratives, subverting the patriotism prevalent within World War II films.

The Thin Red Line presents a fictionalised account of the Battle of Mount Austen, which took place in Guadalcanal during World War II. It mostly follows the soldiers of Charlie Company as they fight to claim the area from Japanese soldiers, although there are brief digressions to the perspectives of a Japanese soldier and an American soldier's wife. Its

ensemble is the largest of Malick's career, with a host of identifiable characters who regularly disappear from the narrative for extended periods of time. Its opening scenes depict Sergeant Witt's (Jim Caviezel) brief time amongst Guadalcanal's inhabitants after going AWOL from his unit. Witt is subsequently discovered and disciplined by his company's First Sergeant, Welsh (Sean Penn), who assigns Witt duty as a stretcher bearer. The interaction between the two characters is one of the narrative's few through-lines, as Witt's beatific optimism clashes with Welsh's cynicism. Charlie Company land on Guadalcanal without incident and make their way toward Hill 210, a heavily fortified Japanese position. The bulk of the film's narrative concerns the American soldiers' attempt to claim Hill 210 in the face of heavy opposition. Captain Staros (Elias Koteas) refuses Lieutenant Colonel Tall's (Nick Nolte) command to seize Hill 210 through a frontal assault, suggesting a less direct attack in an attempt to protect his men. During the battle, Witt is re-assigned to combat despite his previous punishment and assists in claiming the location. After surveying the situation, Tall orders Charlie Company to follow through on his initial command, and Staros's men eventually take the Japanese bunker, although the animosity between Staros and Tall remains.

The soldiers face several further battles while claiming Guadalcanal, but they pale in comparison to the previous conflict. Extended post-combat sequences show the men on leave, although they do not conflate the mission's success with personal fulfilment: Private Bell (Ben Chaplin) receives a letter from his wife requesting a divorce; Tall dismisses Staros from command; and Witt finds Guadalcanal's inhabitants cold and distant. In the final scenes, Witt sacrifices himself so his unit can be warned of nearby Japanese soldiers, in order to prevent further conflict. The film concludes as Charlie Company leaves Guadalcanal. *The Thin Red Line's* narrative is too complex to be captured by a linear plot summary, in part because of the interplay between its dense ensemble cast. Other characters play important roles, including Private Train (John Dee Smith), a soldier who is peripheral within the narrative but

regularly delivers voiceover narration. *The Thin Red Line* is defined by its extensive ensemble cast, who are alternately emphasised and elided within its narrative.

The Thin Red Line presents a combat narrative through the art film's style. Acclaimed film historian David Bordwell's account of the art film describes a mode of representation in which "choices are vague or non-existent. Hence a certain drifting episodic quality to the art film's narrative. Characters may wander out and never re-appear; events may lead to nothing" ("The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" 58). "Art film" is a somewhat arbitrary qualifier, with a number of conflicting definitions, but Bordwell's descriptions are remarkably similar to Malick's treatment of the combat narrative. *The Thin Red Line*'s de-emphasises narrative to an even greater extent than Malick's previous work.⁷ In the middle of the film, Malick interrupts the battle for Hill 210 to show the death of Woody Harrelson's Sergeant Keck – a previously peripheral character – when he accidentally grabs a grenade by the pin. Keck's death – and his disbelief at his mistake, calling it a "recruit trick to pull" – is shown in great detail, as the other soldiers try to bring him solace in his last moments. The scene interrupts the battle sequence for over two minutes, subverting the combat film's typical rhythms through a meaningless mistake that ends a man's life. The scene contains conventional elements, like Keck begging the other soldiers to contact his wife after his death, but it is also striking in its refusal to glorify or sentimentalise Keck, with his near-comical cries of "I blew my butt off!" Its lack of influence on the narrative's subsequent progression – as well as Keck's previous absence from the narrative – demonstrates Malick's emphasis on war's randomness. There are few other instances as extreme as Keck's momentary prominence, but every major character is absent for substantial amounts of screen time, producing the "drifting episodic nature" to which Bordwell refers. The incident also

⁷ *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*'s respective running times are 95 and 94 minutes, almost half of *The Thin Red Line*'s sprawling 171 minutes.

demonstrates the manner in which Malick's depiction of humanity is more earnest than in his 1970s films, maintaining a tendency to construct characters as concepts while also presenting these concepts with greater intricacy. Malick's presentation of a combat film's narrative through the art film's style is truer to wartime experience in its unpredictability and lack of causal narrative.

Despite the combat film's conventional formulas, it is an ideal genre for the art film's disorganised narrative structures. Combat itself is volatile and unpredictable, due largely to the vast number of individuals involved. *The Thin Red Line* is populated with characters whose contradictory perspectives are depicted through stylistic means. The association of character and style is central to Bordwell's exploration of the art film, in which "violations of classical conceptions of time and space are justified as the intrusion of an unpredictable and contingent daily reality or as the subjective reality of complex characters" ("The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" 58-59). The art film invests its scenario with verisimilitude while utilising stylistic techniques that evoke its central characters' perspectives. *The Thin Red Line*'s style – most clearly manifested in a fixation on nature and multiple voiceover narrators – conveys the various ways in which characters process and interpret their wartime experiences. In this sense, it recalls *Apocalypse Now*, which associates military iconography with its central character's psychology through cinematography and sound design. For example, Coppola's early superimposition of the central character's face, a hotel room's fan, and his memories of helicopters in Vietnam (**Shot 2.1**) simultaneously demonstrates the character's surroundings and his disorganised state of mind. *The Thin Red Line*'s application of unconventional style to a traditional genre has led to an ongoing tendency to question the intentionality of Malick's choices. In his review, film critic Roger Ebert stated that "any film that can inspire thoughts like these is worth seeing. But the audience has to finish the work: Malick isn't sure where he's going or what he's saying" ("The Thin Red Line"). Ebert's

interpretation renders Malick's vision as the by-product of a confused director, instead of a long-gestating personal vision. In examining Malick's adaptation of *The Thin Red Line*, Stacy Peebles asserts that the film recreates the combat genre's "characteristics with such elaboration and emphasis that they are no longer characteristics of that genre. It is a war film that is no longer about war" (162). Her reading of the film is much more attuned to the film's genre revisions than Ebert's questioning of Malick's intent. *The Thin Red Line's* unconventional representation of combat refuses objectivity in its evocation of multiple perspectives.

The War Genre Undermined

The Thin Red Line deconstructs the combat film's conventions, stripping the genre of its usual connotations and dismantling its artificial representations. Even as wartime narratives have grown more ambivalent, combat films continue to affirm archetypal masculine roles. *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan* have regularly been compared as iterations of the combat film due to the proximity of their releases. Jordan cites a specific review that criticises *The Thin Red Line* because it "does not offer the generic satisfaction, convention, or resolution of *Saving Private Ryan*" (32).⁸ Jordan's analysis of the two films has little in the way of formal analysis, but his extra-textual consideration of their conformity to or subversion of genre conventions is enlightening. Spielberg and Malick provide a study in contrasts; despite being contemporaneous in age and career, the directors bring entirely different styles and approaches to their work. Malick's films de-emphasise narrative and convey nuanced messages through complicated, ambiguous means, refusing the illusion of objectivity. Spielberg's films are more conventional in style and narrative, whether they are

⁸ A survey of reviews reveals consistent comparisons between the two films, but that comparison was often weighted in favour of Malick's film. Michael O'Sullivan called *The Thin Red Line* "the thinking person's *Saving Private Ryan*" ("Red Line: Above and Beyond"), while Kevin Lally claims that "Steven Spielberg's harrowing vision of the D-Day invasion in this summer's *Saving Private Ryan* was undeniably harrowing, but *The Thin Red Line* is the riskier film ("The Thin Red Line")."

crowd-pleasing blockbusters – such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) – or the more sombre projects – like *Schindler's List* (1993) – which he has undertaken with greater frequency in his later career. The word “conventional” here is not intended with qualitative connotations, as both directors regularly attain their intended objectives, but it is important to identify the differences in their respective oeuvres. The proximity of release dates makes their differences all the more striking, with Malick's film esoterically delineating contradictory perspectives on war, and Spielberg's showing a more conventional depiction of wartime brotherhood and masculinity. This chapter will examine the manner in which Malick's embodiment of his characters' perspectives – and inclusion of perspectives often-neglected within the combat film – revises the combat film's conventions, in comparison to the relatively conventional *Saving Private Ryan*.

In order to compare Malick and Spielberg's films, it is necessary to summarise *Saving Private Ryan*'s narrative. The film's prologue shows an elderly Private Ryan (Harrison Young) reflecting back on the war, a device which diegetically justifies the narrative. The soldiers – including Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) – land on Omaha beach during the 1944 Normandy invasion under heavy opposition from German forces. When the military realises that three of four brothers have been killed in action, they order Miller to extract the fourth brother – the titular Private Ryan (Matt Damon) – who is missing in action. Miller assembles a group of men including Upham (Jeremy Davies) as their translator, despite Upham's lack of combat experience. The group plainly regards Upham with contempt because of his reticence regarding violence. During a subsequent conflict, Miller's group takes a German hostage. Against the rest of the company's wishes, Upham convinces Miller not to execute the prisoner. The company finds Ryan with a small group of paratroopers who are attempting to protect a strategically vital bridge. When Ryan refuses to leave his fellow soldiers behind, Miller and his remaining men to stay and defend the bridge. Most of the American soldiers

die in the ensuing conflict, despite extensive German casualties. Miller himself is fatally wounded by the same German soldier who Upham had convinced him not to execute, leading Upham to kill the German soldier. The battle ends as American reinforcements arrive and secure the area. In the present day, Ryan visits the Normandy American Cemetery and Memorial with his family, where his wife assures him that he earned the other men's sacrifices. *Saving Private Ryan* presents a conventional war movie from the perspective of an elderly soldier reflecting on his experiences.

Saving Private Ryan's narrative explores masculinity and brotherhood in wartime, with its narrative justifying American actions. The film's discourse on wartime violence is constructed through Upham's place within the group. Upon his introduction, Upham nervously admits that he has not seen any combat, but Miller needs his knowledge of French and German languages for the mission. When one of the other men asks what Upham's novel is about, and he states that it addresses "the bonds of brotherhood between soldiers during war," Caparzo (Vin Diesel) says, "Brotherhood? What do you know about brotherhood?" This interaction is indicative of Upham's status within the company – and the masculine unit – throughout the film's first half. As Jordan suggests, his opposition to executing the German soldier becomes "fateful, tragic and misguided" in the context of that soldier's climactic betrayal (144). Upham shoots that soldier in retaliation – albeit after he has already surrendered – in the only violent action he commits during the film. In this context, Upham's earlier defence of the German soldier is understood as naiveté, with his decision to kill the man understood as an instance of justifiable violence and an indication of his elevation into the masculine unit. Spielberg's discourse regarding wartime masculinity is presented through Upham, whose masculine development is conveyed through the combat film's conventional narrative.

The Thin Red Line's characters are visually and aurally conflated, challenging audience identification. Despite extensive narration, Malick's characters are even more reticent than in his previous features. Their silence and identical military uniforms often make it difficult to differentiate them. Malick scholar Lloyd Michaels suggests that Witt (**Shot 2.2**) and Bell (**Shot 2.3**) "seem to have been cast because of Ben Chaplin and James Caviezel's resemblance to one another, a visual affinity compounded by their meditative speech" (62). That affinity extends even further than Michaels identifies, as seen in the tendency of various critics to attribute Train's voiceover narration – including the film's opening and closing lines – to Witt.⁹ Their physical resemblance and lack of onscreen dialogue distorts their individuality, leading the spectator to identify the men as a collective instead of as individuals. That inclination is compounded by the film's lack of a central character, which ties directly into its themes. Early in the film, Witt opines through voiceover that "Maybe all men got one big soul [that] everyone's a part of. All the same man. All one self." Jordan notes that "the camera does not necessarily focus on a character as we hear him speak; we hear one character and see another. The scene develops group consciousness, a theme continued throughout the film" (108). One noteworthy example of this comes when Train speaks in voiceover narration while the soldiers approach Hill 210. He asks, "Who are you to live in all these many forms? Your death that captures all. You too, are the source of all that's gonna be born: your glory, mercy, peace, truth. You give calm a spirit, understanding, courage, the contented heart." As he says "spirit," Malick cuts to a shot of Bell (**Shot 2.4**), before cutting to a woman touching a man's hands (**Shot 2.5**), and finally panning up to Bell's wife (**Shot 2.6**) as his voiceover concludes. Bell does not know his fellow soldier's

⁹ In Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's *Forms of Being*, they claim that during the final voiceover, "the voice we hear is that of Witt, who has been killed" (134-135). Stacy Peebles states that after Witt's death, "we see scenes of light filtering through trees and of Witt swimming, his character again associated with this profound affiliation with nature. We hear his voice-over a few minutes later," after which she quotes Train's final voiceover.

thoughts, but the synchronisation of Train's narration with Bell's memory blurs the boundary between their identities. Scenes like these figure the characters as pieces of a larger whole rather than individuals, with their varying perspectives allowing them to embody the spectrum of human thought. As throughout his oeuvre, Malick's visual and aural conflation of Charlie Company creates a fragmented group consciousness that embodies its characters' contradictory perspectives.

The Thin Red Line's studio-mandated cameos contradict the film's trend of conflation. Malick struggled to fund his film, with Sony withdrawing its funding three months before shooting began. Fox 2000 took up the project with the stipulation that Malick cast several prominent actors, despite his intention to populate the film with a mostly-unknown cast. Malick scholar Martin Flanagan examines the film's casting, noting the director's refusal to place "star names in showcase roles as stoical platoon leaders or heroic pilots" in the tradition of classical combat films (132). Instead, Malick includes brief cameos from recognisable stars such as George Clooney and John Travolta.¹⁰ The central roles are largely cast with actors who had little audience recognition, with exceptions such as Nick Nolte and Sean Penn. French film theorist Michel Chion asserts that *The Thin Red Line* emerges "not so much as an anti-star film, peopled only by anonymous faces, as a film that places itself beyond the difference between primary and secondary roles or between famous actors and others who are unknown or little-known" (20). Although casting celebrities was not Malick's original intention, the result constitutes a critique of Hollywood's production system, with distractingly recognisable stars appearing for fleeting cameos before disappearing. The casting forces metatextual engagement with the film, as it subverts the star system's usual function. *Saving Private Ryan* conforms to Flanagan's aforementioned conception of

¹⁰ The film was partially sold on the involvement of these actors despite their cameo roles, as seen in the use of their names in the film's advertising (**Shot 2.7**)

celebrity in the combat film in its casting of Tom Hanks, one of 1998's biggest stars, with Matt Damon – then an up-and-coming actor – in a key supporting role. Celebrity partially dictates our relationship to *Saving Private Ryan*'s characters, directing our sympathies and the narrative's progression, in complete contrast to *The Thin Red Line*'s indifference to Hollywood's hierarchy. Malick's strategic casting secured his funding, but as Michaels suggests, it also "serves to underscore how the military institution strips away individual identity" (63). Michaels notes the manner in which even the most recognisable faces are denied the star system's usual benefits within Malick's narrative. *The Thin Red Line*'s casting brings it into line with *Badlands* in its extra-narrative considerations of cinematic artifice. On a metatextual level, these celebrities are forced into the same conflict as the unknowns who largely populate the film. Spielberg and Malick's treatment of celebrity and casting defines their ideologically opposed approaches to war: *Saving Private Ryan*'s narrative centres on extracting the titular character from the war, emphasising his individual importance, while Malick intentionally blurs the boundaries between individual perspectives. Although *The Thin Red Line*'s celebrity cameos were externally imposed, they force a consideration of the way the hierarchical star system often governs narratives.

The Thin Red Line's palpable restraint regarding the depiction of violence defies contemporary trends. Filmic violence has consistently moved toward verisimilitude, with complex prosthetics and special effects conveying brutality's violence. Jordan argues that the desire for verisimilitude became even stronger in the post-Vietnam era, placing the "shock and horror" of *Saving Private Ryan*'s opening sequence (**Shots 2.8-2.9**) within that context (101). Jordan's assertion ignores the war genre's graphic representations of violence relative to their era. Matthew Sitter's thesis details the relationship of violence and masculinity in World War II era war films. He notes that the censorship of filmic violence "was greatly reduced for war films" and that Hollywood "used images of violence to validate certain

values” (91, 92). In this context, *Saving Private Ryan*’s graphic violence – while shocking – indicates its conformity to genre history. In contrast, *The Thin Red Line* treats violence in a relatively restrained manner. Gore is not entirely absent – early in the film, the company stumbles across a pair of corpses in a clearing, one of which is missing its lower half (**Shot 2.10**) – but the film largely refrains from graphic violence. Even in the midst of combat, the film’s gaze is regularly drawn to the surrounding landscape. During one shot, a butterfly flying past provides an aside to the main action as the soldiers rush into battle (**Shot 2.11**). Morrison and Schur argue that the film “expresses abhorrence of war to a degree that is astonishing [...] – as if to express rage, or outrage, at the ravages of war would merely reenact the same impulses that brought them about” (29). In contrast, Michaels suggests that “*The Thin Red Line* cannot be readily categorised as an anti-war film. For one thing, it is simply too beautiful; for another, it reveals much wider concerns” (65). Morrison and Schur’s argument is much more compelling, given the bleakness – despite its restraint – of Malick’s staging of both combat and its aftermath. In this context, the film’s aesthetic beauty is intended to resist the horrors of war, eschewing the usual glorification of aggression and masculinity that combat films regularly employ to convey revulsion regarding combat. Spielberg depicts the cost of war through graphic, bracing action sequences which are, nonetheless, staged in the spirit of the classical combat film. It also partially justifies war’s human cost in scenes such as the one where Captain Miller asks Private Ryan to “earn this,” referring to the sacrifices he and the other characters have made. In contrast, *The Thin Red Line* dwells on lost lives and the emotional toll on the survivors. Soon after a central combat sequence, a soldier who had previously been gleefully killing enemy soldiers is shown crying alone in the rain. The image wordlessly suggests psychological trauma, undermining any catharsis potentially derived from the battle. *The Thin Red Line* refuses to replicate the transgressions of war in its content or approach.

The Thin Red Line's unconventional structure undermines the action that often defines the genre, evoking humanity over national allegiances. Flanagan accurately identifies conventional combat films as featuring "tightly plotted narrative structured around a series of action sequences" (132). *Saving Private Ryan* again provides an excellent example of conventional structure, with Spielberg regularly punctuating his narrative with action sequences. The film's most intense action sequences bookend the narrative, providing Spielberg's cinematic landscape with a climax that results in the protagonists achieving their goals, albeit with heavy losses. In contrast, *The Thin Red Line*'s structure is defiantly unconventional, deferring any action sequences for a full forty minutes. It also denies the spectator a climactic battle sequence, instead dwelling at length on the personal consequences of violence. Flanagan notes that during the extended battle for Hill 210, "more traditional techniques like slow motion, point-of-view shots and rapid cutting" establish "a degree of formal affinity with the war film" (133). Flanagan analyses the sequence's less conventional elements, asserting that Malick "alternately embraces and denies formal convention" (133). That reading of the film is valid, but does not acknowledge the complex interrelation of Hollywood genres with the art film's style. Bordwell's account of the art film primarily addresses European films, but also analyses Hollywood's adoption of art film conventions, suggesting that the process "must be seen as not simple copying but complex transformation. In particular, American film genres intervene to warp art-cinema conventions in new directions" ("The Art Cinema as a Mode of Film Practice" 61-62). *The Thin Red Line*'s sporadic embrace of genre convention is inextricable from its deployment of the art film style, with its conventional elements serving to emphasise its stark departures. *The Thin Red Line*'s structure denies the spectator a climactic battle sequence, instead dwelling on the personal consequences of violence. Malick has little interest in packaging history or violence for audience entertainment, draining his narrative of manufactured tension to explore his

film's thematic concerns. *The Thin Red Line's* unconventional structure provokes contemplation about the nature of violence.

Interrogating Masculinity and Including the Other

Combat films generally glorify masculinity, rarely problematising the implications of these affirmations. Malick's film is conventional in its overwhelmingly male ensemble, but its representation of masculinity continues *Badlands'* interrogation of masculinity. Lieutenant Colonel Tall is the film's most aggressive force, outranking almost every named soldier, with his desire for advancement within the military defining him. Despite this, one of Tall's voiceovers reveals his inner life, as he says, "Shut up in a tomb. Can't lift the lid. Played a role I never conceived." Malick implies that Tall's masculine persona – and the aggression inherent to that persona – is a performative construction, born from necessity rather than any essential self. The need for this masculine construction is revealed within Tall's onscreen conversation with Brigadier General Quintard (John Travolta) – the only superior officer he speaks to throughout the film – during which the man tells him that there is "always someone ready to jump in, if you're not." As Jordan notes, *The Thin Red Line* "removes much of the social construction and ideology surrounding masculinity because it lacks the traditional gradations and hierarchy of masculinity set up in other films" (115). Jordan's assessment is perceptive in its understanding that Malick presents a superficial "gradation and hierarchy of masculinity" through elements like Tall's aggression, before nuancing and justifying them. Tall is pressured to perform a kind of hyper-masculinity by the military's structure, which can displace any man who does not display the masculinity that is expected of its high-ranking officers. The film suggests the disparity between socially acceptable masculine identities, which are exposed as artificial, and men's interior lives, which are more complex than the archetype to which they are expected to conform. Staros comes into direct conflict with Tall – and by implication, the military's masculine structure – over his belief in the

inherent value of human life. During one of their conversations, Tall asks Staros, “How many men is it worth? How many lives? One? Two? Twenty? Lives will be lost in your company, Captain. If you don’t have the stomach for it, now is the time to let me know.” Tall’s words echo Quintard’s earlier statement in their presentation of the military as a de-individuating force which will expend any number of lives to achieve its goals. Malick’s film questions the way the military forces men to construct artificial masculine personas and reduces its soldiers to statistics instead of individuals.

The Thin Red Line depicts its central characters with complexity, alternately conforming to and subverting traditional representations of masculinity. Genre theorist Mark Gallagher’s analysis of typical male-dominated narratives concludes that “gradations of masculinity are apparent, and characters are defined through their relationships to off-screen women or to more feminised male characters” (220). Although Gallagher is discussing Hollywood’s action films, his observation is equally applicable to combat films. *The Thin Red Line* complicates representations of masculinity through characters like Tall, whose masculine facade conceals a complex interior. Tall’s projected machismo is contrasted with Witt’s deep respect for all forms of life – despite the contradiction inherent to his willing participation in combat – and association with the natural world. Despite these less conventionally masculine traits, he does not satisfy the combat film’s archetype of the feminised male. When he and Welsh are discussing Witt’s punishment for going AWOL, Witt stubbornly says, “I can take anything you dish out. I’m twice the man you are.” This stereotypically masculine rhetoric complicates Witt’s character, tempering his gentler characteristics with masculine bravado. Tall and Witt are diametrically opposed in their construction, but they are both introspective masculine figures, indicating Malick’s refusal to define prominent characters through one mood or idea. Further, the military’s hierarchy complicates our perception of the characters. As one of the most highly ranked soldiers, Tall

would typically be a heroic figure, as combat films regularly depict the military hierarchy as a meritocracy. However, as Flanagan argues, Tall's distance from combat "brings out an implicit critique of hierarchical military structure" (136). Tall is regularly shown observing combat – an element which recalls the reflexivity and foregrounding of the gaze within *Badlands* – through looking devices (**Shots 2.12-2.13**). Spielberg also regularly draws attention to Upham's distance from combat and his gaze (**Shot 2.14**). The disparity of their ranks could be elided through their respective passive stances, but the composition of these frames expresses their place within the narratives; Upham is separate from the other soldiers, but his gaze into the camera marks him as the audience surrogate, while Tall's distance separates him from both the other soldiers and the spectator. *Saving Private Ryan*'s soldiers fight as a cohesive masculine unit, with Upham's distance indicating his lack of integration into that unit. That distance is symbolically resolved upon the killing of the German soldier, which links him to his fellow soldiers – despite their deaths – in the act of killing. In contrast, Tall's inaction further emphasises Malick's consistent refusal to unify his men. There is no resolution to that lack of unity; in fact, Tall's final scenes show him dismissing Staros, separating the soldiers still further. Malick's subversion and complication of masculine roles expresses a refusal to endorse the combat genre's conception of masculinity.

The Thin Red Line superficially replicates the exclusion of female perspectives from combat films. The genre traditionally privileges male perspectives, with masculinity coded as power, the kind of force that is necessary for success within combat scenarios. Females are almost entirely absent from *Saving Private Ryan*, with scattered references to them serving to bond the masculine unit. A bawdy story Ryan tells Miller about his brother having sex with an allegedly unattractive woman highlights the film's lack of female perspectives. *The Thin Red Line* nominally continues the combat film's tradition of excluding women from depictions of war, but it also critiques the men who mythologise them. Michaels rightly

asserts that Malick's films often foreground "a kind of separation anxiety, not only from Paradise but from persons with whom one seemed to share a destiny" (78). Bell fulfils that role within *The Thin Red Line*, as a man who uses his memory of – and anticipation of returning to – his wife to motivate him in battle. His intense dedication to her is evoked in the early voiceover when he says, "If I go first, I'll wait for you there. On the other side of the dark waters. Be with me now." Malick regularly cuts to Bell's memories of his wife, Marty (Miranda Otto), who is conspicuously silent, suggesting that he relates to her as a mythic figure instead of an individual. Their fate is foreshadowed when Marty is first granted a voice. She stands alone in the ocean in one of his flashbacks (**Shot 2.15**), in a rare moment of isolation, and says, "Come out. Come out where I am." Her statement responds to Bell's "Be with me now," implying that she is moving away while he remains static. Bell's loyalty to Marty is an admirable quality, but it is noteworthy that his memories of her feature little consideration of her perspective. Bell's attitude can simultaneously be read as an indication of his loyalty and lack of consideration of his wife as a separate being with her own point of view.

The Thin Red Line's treatment of gender implicitly critiques the combat film's denial of female perspectives. Marty eventually requests a divorce from Bell after she falls in love with another man. Her letter to Bell – which she reads through voiceover narration – constitutes the encroachment of a female perspective into the combat genre. The decision to have Marty read the letter herself allows her to express her own pain and perspective, literally and metaphorically giving her a voice. Her brief presence does not constitute a full female narrative, but it disrupts and undermines Bell's masculine perspective, and the combat genre's exclusion of female subjectivities. Marty's presence invites comparisons between *The Thin Red Line* and *Badlands*: both films disrupt the patriarchal gaze and the way that gender tends to be constructed within genre films. Chion compares Marty to the female narrators of

Malick's earlier films, noting that they feature "the presence of a female narrative voice belonging to a character who is too young or immature to be responsible for the tragedies and horrors in which the male protagonist is implicated" (45). Chion's reading of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven* is applicable to *The Thin Red Line*, as Marty cannot relieve the burden of Bell's war experience, although there is no indication that Marty is "immature." It is also relevant in the context of other readings of Bell and Marty's narrative, such as Michaels's reference to "the fact that [Marty] betrays Bell," (65) or Jordan's suggestion that "Bell's wife, perhaps, comes off negatively in this sequence, abandoning the man who fights to get home to her" (154). Jordan in particular writes at length about the exclusion of women from war narratives, but paradoxically does not seem to acknowledge Marty's right to articulate her own perspective in this key scene. Her actions may hurt her husband, but her honesty and straightforwardness is admirable. *The Thin Red Line* rebukes the war genre's erasure of female perspectives and the men who perceive them as mythic figures.

The Thin Red Line's inclusive gender representation is also reflected in its treatment of race, with sympathy being extended to the "enemy" soldiers in the film's latter half. In its first half, the Japanese soldiers remain largely unseen, a menacing force that could attack at any moment. Their absence leaves the threat largely abstract, with tension generated through uncertainty rather than direct conflict. While laying out the plan, Captain Staros says, "I'm sure the Japs got something there to protect from approaches." At this moment, Malick cuts to a point-of-view shot from the Japanese encampment, showing at least one machine gun (**Shot 2.16**). Malick scholar Robert Silberman is correct in arguing that these shots aid in "increasing the tension by building suspense, and establishing a complex point of view that goes beyond simple identification with the Americans" (170). Superficially, the shot visually punctuates Staros's dialogue, confirming his suspicions for the spectator. Beyond that, though, it momentarily invokes identification with the Japanese soldiers. From this vantage

point, Malick's representation of the Japanese soldiers following combat is particularly significant in its deviation from conventional representations of the Japanese as enemies of the Allied forces. Genre theorist Jennifer J. Asenas captures the film's subversion of jingoistic combat film conventions in her assertion that the Japanese soldiers "who clutch their dead friends and scream in anguish are a far cry from what one would expect from a formidable enemy, so triumph is tragic instead of consummating" (61). The spectator's knowledge of Hill 210's importance in the war effort does not make seeing the defeat of the Japanese easier, particularly when the film's most graphic acts – whether implied or depicted – are American brutalities against defenceless Japanese soldiers. Seeing their suffering forces the spectator to acknowledge war as a matter of perspective; the Japanese soldiers are initially perceived as the film's antagonists, but their helplessness challenges that perception. The Japanese soldiers' early facelessness makes it impossible to revel in the American soldiers' victory, but when they are finally revealed, their humanity and vulnerability complicates identification.

Malick's conflation of individuals extends to the visualisation and perspectives of the Japanese soldiers. Rapid cutting in the combat sequences contributes even further to Malick's frustration of identification, as the similarly-coloured uniforms make it easy to confuse American and Japanese soldiers (**Shot 2.17**). Close-range combat scenes rapidly become an undifferentiated mass of killing. Malick scholar Ron Mottram argues that in these close quarters, "the killer, the suffering and the fear are presented in terms so remarkably human that the very idea of an enemy as other disappears. What remains is simply a human tragedy" (21). Mottram's assertion captures the empathy of Malick's combat film, where it becomes impossible to impose national identity in the face of such bloodshed. A late shift in perspective – akin to the intervention of Marty's feminine voice within a male world – comes

during a haunting voiceover whose source is a deceased Japanese soldier.¹¹ He uses the same tenor of questioning language as the American soldiers, asking “Are you righteous, kind? Does your confidence lie in this? Are you loved by all? Know that I was, too.” This narration fundamentally rebukes the combat genre’s tendency to represent foreign soldiers solely as enemies. The shift in perspective denies any impulse to celebrate death, and the narration’s familiarity makes it explicitly clear that the conception of “one big soul” transcends racial differences. Malick’s film considers the perspective of the racial “other” in the same way it does women’s wartime experiences, rendering the war as a human tragedy instead of a national one.

Malick’s Men: Their Voices and their Silence

The Thin Red Line’s voiceovers suggest a uniformity of thought that bonds its soldiers, but their silence leaves them alienated from those who might understand them. Philosophical film theorists Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit note that the voiceovers “carry the weight of the film’s emotional and intellectual expressivity. This allows Malick to give us the face as pure visuality, almost to make, within the sound and images of *The Thin Red Line*, another film, a silent film” (146). That delineation of the soldiers’ inner and outer lives serves the aesthetic purpose that Bersani and Dutoit outline, but it also heightens the characters’ alienation. The tenor of the voiceover narration is almost unfailingly awestruck, whether it is Witt and Train’s consideration of the world around them, or Bell rhapsodising over his wife’s memory. Voiceover narration is heard near-constantly, while interactions between Charlie Company’s soldiers are rare. Their silence indicates the fundamental disconnection between them. The cinematography clarifies the disparity, situating silent characters within the same frame, and emphasising their simultaneous proximity and isolation. Film historian John

¹¹ Jordan’s analysis of the film mistakenly attributes the narration to Staros (150), eliding one of the film’s most striking disruptions of combat film conventions.

Streamas justifies the film's philosophical voiceovers, given that "if those who fought in combat asked these questions during the war, in such places as the Guadalcanal jungle, they probably asked silently, internally" (143). Critics like Ebert questioned whether soldiers would be thinking such thoughts during combat,¹² but the voiceovers serve the ideological purpose of juxtaposing the characters' inner lives against their assumed masculine roles. Early in the film, Tall laments the direction he has taken in his life, thinking of "all I might have given for love's sake. Too late." Tall's voiceover is decidedly more pragmatic than the other soldiers', but its plaintive nature differentiates it from his external demeanour. Chion argues that these voiceovers "isolate the characters from each other: those who have them from each other, because they possess them at different times, and those who have them from those who don't" (54-55). Chion articulates the isolation inherent to the voiceover without reference to *Badlands*, where Holly's connection to the spectator through her voiceover indicated her disconnection from Kit. That alienation is heightened in *The Thin Red Line*, as the spectator glimpses the inner lives of many soldiers, all of whom express some commonality, which is hidden from their fellow soldiers but evident to the spectator. *The Thin Red Line*'s voiceover narration highlights both the common ground and the isolation between its characters, critiquing the masculine war machine that separates them.

The Thin Red Line unfolds within a kind of timeless dreamscape. Its time period and historical context are rarely referred to explicitly. As Bersani and Dutoit note, there is not "a single expression of patriotic sentiment in the film" or any "attempt whatsoever to provide a moral or historical justification or even explanation for the violence of war" (129). These qualities depart from the nationalism often present within combat narratives, with Malick's soldiers fighting not for their country, but because they have no other choice. Once again,

¹² In discussing the voiceover narration, Ebert claims that "the soundtrack allows us to hear the thoughts of the characters, but there is no conviction that these characters would have these thoughts" ("The Thin Red Line").

there is a connection to Malick's treatment of history in *Badlands*, in that Malick prioritises his characters' experiences above overdetermined historical signifiers. The choice to elide historical context works in conjunction with the narration in isolating the soldiers, leaving them without a common cause to unite under. *Saving Private Ryan* is diametrically opposed in the way it invokes national identity and patriotism, with the film literally opening and closing on a shot of the American flag (**Shot 2.18**). *The Thin Red Line*'s lack of historical referents connects it further to Malick's oeuvre, which as Flanagan notes, has "an interest in isolating a mythic quality in overdetermined historical markers such as the two World Wars or 1950s suburbia, in turning away from common modes of representing American cultural history" (137). Flanagan captures a central tenet of Malick's films, which tend to be set in heavily-represented periods of American history. Paradoxically, Malick's films demythologise iconic American narratives by constructing overtly mythic atmospheres, and exposing the inherent fictitiousness of cinematic representations of history. His determination to destabilise American cultural myths that have been normalised through hegemonic representation simultaneously acknowledges and deconstructs conventional Hollywood narratives. *The Thin Red Line* eschews cultural signifiers and refuses patriotism, undermining American mythology.

The Thin Red Line extends empathy to all viewpoints and refuses to demonise characters for convenient narrative shortcuts. Malick extends his empathy even to ostensible antagonists, as when he reveals the hidden depths that complicate and deepen Tall. Similarly, he refuses to venerate characters like Bell and Witt, who fight for their country but also demonstrate naiveté. Bell's attitude towards his wife is critiqued, while Witt is pitted repeatedly against his superior, Welsh. Witt and Welsh's differences of opinion and Welsh's response to Witt's death carry the film to its conclusion. Witt subscribes to a more transcendental view of life, while Welsh demonstrates his viewpoint when he asks, "What

difference you think you can make? One single man in all this madness. If you die, it's gonna be for nothing. There's not some other world out there where everything's gonna be okay. There's just this world. Just this rock." His aloofness protects him from the disappointments that befall the other soldiers. As Chion suggests, "in this collective, choral, symphonic film, in which men share a war, ordeals and food, each is thrown back on himself all the more harshly at one point or another" (27). As has been demonstrated throughout this chapter, Malick critiques each of the film's prominent characters, and provides them opportunities to reflect on their actions and perspectives. Welsh remains apart from the other men, shielding himself with an almost nihilistic cynicism. Despite this, he is never an antagonistic presence, even when he punishes Witt. *The Thin Red Line's* characters clash but, crucially, they are never constructed as antagonists, with their points of view articulately constructed. Witt's veneration for human life is doubtless closer to Malick's perspective than Tall's cruel pragmatism, but the latter man's complex characterisation denies any interpretation of him as a villain. The film is not a moral fable so much as an evocation of a multiplicity of perspectives. As Streamas notes, when Keck throws the grenade's pin instead of the grenade, resulting in his death, it "occasions no bleak satire or moral outrage. It is a regrettable episode in a seemingly endless procession of regrettable episodes" (147). Keck's death is not a moral consequence for his previous actions – on the contrary, he is hardly a presence in the film until his sudden death – nor does it serve as part of a character arc for himself or another character; it is simply an illustration of brutal wartime circumstances. Malick's eschewal of clear-cut protagonists, antagonists, and traditional narrative causality contributes to his mournful consideration of life's worth.

The central masculine figures of Malick's oeuvre are caught between their idealised aspirations and the harsh truths they are confronted with. Malick's men often seem to be searching for some kind of transcendence, with Mottram perceiving "an Edenic yearning to

recapture a lost wholeness of being, an idyllic state of integration with the natural and good both within and without ourselves” (15). This yearning connects characters as disparate as *Badlands*’ Kit to *The Thin Red Line*’s Witt, generating thematic resonances even as it highlights their differences. It also creates common ground between *The Thin Red Line*’s masculine figures, with their contradictory perspectives equally embodied and interrogated. Malick comments upon the multiplicity of perspectives when Tall remarks, “One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there’s nothing but unanswered pain. That death’s got the final world. It’s laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory. Feels something smiling through at him.” His words define Malick’s approach to character and tone within *The Thin Red Line*, in which every character’s perspective is equally valid. The foregrounding of contradictory perspectives has a different impact here than in *Badlands*’ satire. The counterpoints Malick presents are here provided by other characters’ perspectives, as opposed to *Badlands*’ affectless tone and perception of its characters. His lack of didacticism contrasts sharply with traditional combat films – including *Saving Private Ryan* – which present their masculine narratives in relatively straightforward ways. *The Thin Red Line* embraces its characters’ conflicting viewpoints, affirming different – and opposing – ideas in different moments.

Nature and the Act of Looking

Malick’s treatment of Witt is contrary to the combat film’s usual strategies, placing us within his perspective while also indicating his naiveté. Early in the film, before any onscreen characters speak, Malick depicts Melanesians swimming in the ocean (**Shot 2.19**). The scene seems diegetically unmotivated before the introduction of Witt into the scene, whose gaze into the water (**Shot 2.20**) retroactively justifies it. Structurally, the scene is reminiscent of Claire Denis’s *Chocolat* (1988), which contextualises its opening shots of a black father and son (**Shot 2.21**) through the central female character France – associated with colonialism –

watching them (**Shot 2.22**). Both films aesthetically evoke the colonial gaze in their presentation of Witt and France's perspectives. The voiceover functions similarly, presenting multiple viewpoints to the spectator. However, the characters' perspectives are often qualified and undermined. Early in the film, Witt talks to a Melanesian woman, stating that "Kids around here never fight." His perception is revealed as a romantic fantasy when she responds, "Sometimes when you see them playing, they always fight," suggesting that Witt's status as an outsider limits his perspective. Jordan's assertion that "the natives themselves are depicted as living an idyllic existence even as war surrounds them" takes Witt's misconceptions at face value (104). Late in the film, Witt interacts with another Melanesian tribe, his wartime experiences forcing him to recognise their hardships. During this interaction, Malick showcases images which indicate the presence of disease and death (**Shot 2.23**), followed by reaction shots of Witt's crestfallen expression (**Shot 2.24**). These sequences could be read as a metaphorical representation of war corrupting a utopian society, but the skulls in particular connote a history that Witt can never be privy to, due to the transitory nature of his presence in Guadalcanal. These images – in combination with the aforementioned Melanesian woman correcting Witt's perspective – do not suggest a sombre anti-war message, but an acknowledgment of Witt's previous naiveté. In terms of the combat film's conventions, Witt is presented as a kind of naïve innocent, similar to Spielberg's Upham. The difference between the two representations is that *Saving Private Ryan*'s narrative pushes Upham toward a more conventional masculine role. Within Malick's world, there is no preferable alternative to Witt's naiveté, with Welsh's distance and Tall's thirst for power only providing other compromised modes of masculinity. Malick associates Witt with the film's style while also critiquing him, simultaneously inhabiting and problematising his perspective.

The Thin Red Line's reverence for life is extended to the entirety of its diegetic universe. The film's human characters, however flawed, are regarded equally by the director. That sense of equality is also seen in the treatment of the natural world. Chion rightly argues that "there is no parallelism, let alone any metaphorical use of animals (such as: man is a crocodile)" (42). The natural world is never reduced to a metaphor for the struggles of the film's human characters, as Malick's regular and seemingly random inserts of nature's sublimity or danger locate them within a complex world without binding them to reductive symbolism. It represents an extension of Malick's generosity with his human characters, refusing to elevate any species above the others. Even in the midst of battle, humans are not of central importance, as previously shown in the shot of the butterfly drawing attention from combat (**Shot 2.11**). Malick's camera often lingers on images of nature at peace, but these serene respites are constantly shattered by combat. Bersani and Dutoit claim that we don't see a war "at the heart of nature, but rather a war brought into the heart of nature by men" (131). Their assertion is persuasive, but any temptation to read the film as juxtaposing man's violent nature and nature's fundamental peacefulness is complicated by the suggestion of nature at war with itself. Their argument is similar to cinema theorist Dana Polan's suggestion that Malick's films "seems to imagine incoherence as only a contingent situation that one is in danger of falling into rather than a fundamental condition that one inevitably is always already in" (271). Bersani and Dutoit and Polan put forward interpretations with much less complexity and ambiguity than Malick presents. The film's opening lines – delivered by Private Train in voiceover narration – are "What's this war in the heart of nature? Why does nature vie with itself? [Why does] the land contend with the sea?" Its opening shot shows a crocodile, half-submerged in the water (**Shot 2.25**), generating tension before any suggestion of war has arrived. Malick is wary of positing any kind of objective utopian ideal, hence his complication of Witt's relationship to the Melanesians, and these opening questions regarding

the violence inherent within the natural world. His narrative and imagery are ambivalent, encapsulating several ideas in representations of war, masculinity, nature and history. The resulting complexity emulates something much closer to our “reality,” with conflicting perspectives creating uncertainty regarding any unbiased truth. Malick’s complex representation of nature connects to his representation of humanity, with no living being claiming precedence over the film’s diegesis.

The Thin Red Line foregrounds the gaze in a manner that emphasises its multitude of perspectives. Even beyond Malick’s employment of the colonial gaze, the film engages with the idea of looking, frequently showing close-ups of its characters reflecting on the landscape before them in shock or wonder. While the frequency of these shots encourages identification with the characters, it also encourages reflection upon the act of looking. They also function as a metaphor for the way spectators interact with the cinematic medium by embracing the simultaneous presence and absence of the filmic image. In his seminal text, *The World Viewed*, aesthetic philosopher Stanley Cavell argued that “objects projected on a screen are inherently reflexive, they occur as self-referential, reflecting upon their physical origins. Their presence refers to their absence, their location in another place” (xvi). Cinematic images present a “reality” that has to be simultaneously accepted and rejected, reflecting the world even as reality cannot be palpably reproduced. Malick’s subversive construction of genre and perspective asserts the impossibility of producing an objective cinematic reality. *The Thin Red Line*’s reflexive inclusion of multiple gazes facilitates a commentary on cinematic artifice.

The Thin Red Line’s final scenes play less as a conclusion than as a stalemate, refusing definitive closure. Its ending further solidifies its thesis: that history is not a fixed point to be conveyed in textbooks, but a multitude of irreconcilable perspectives. Early in the film, Witt prays that he can meet death “with the same calm” as his mother, “‘cause that’s

where it's hidden. The immortality I hadn't seen." He seems peaceful and unafraid at the time of his death, seemingly fulfilling his prayer. Jordan argues that Witt "gets his wish: to meet death with the same calm he believed his mother was able to muster" (155). Jordan's assertion is compelling in terms of narrative closure, but it is hardly definitive in the context of what is presented. His expression before his death during the scene is inscrutable (**Shot 2.26**, offering the spectator no strong evidence as to his final thoughts or feelings. Further, there is no voiceover narration during this confrontation, making it impossible to assert any definitive interpretation. Although Witt's thoughts have been sporadically heard throughout the movie, spectator identification is problematised during his final scene, forcing assumptions that are never explicitly confirmed. *The Thin Red Line's* ambiguity renders its themes with even greater complexity, as the various, contradictory viewpoints that spectators assume reflect the characters' own divergent perspectives. There is another striking comparison between *The Thin Red Line* and *Saving Private Ryan* in that the latter film's men sacrifice their lives during combat to defend the bridge, while Witt sacrifices his life to prevent further combat. Although both films show characters sacrificing their own lives, they present those actions within entirely different narrative contexts. *The Thin Red Line's* final scenes offer little closure, restricting access to Witt's final thoughts despite his previous voiceover narration.

Witt's death is the culmination of the film's consideration of the military's inherent de-individualisation. Early in the film, a Melanesian woman tells him that he looks "as an army." There is an inherent connection between Witt and Charlie Company that cannot be severed by his temporary escape from the military's hierarchy. That connection is borne out by the film's narrative, which shows his inexorable return to his company. In his final scenes, the conflation that dominates the film is presented in an ambivalent manner that plays into the film's denial of binary structures. As previously stated, Witt sacrifices his life to prevent

combat, sending his fellow soldiers to warn their company while distracting the Japanese soldiers. It is one of the only moments in which he is truly separate from any other American soldier, and in this moment, he attains the separation that his previous actions indicated he desired. However, his burial complicates that separation, with his grave (**Shot 2.27**) simultaneously associated with the natural world and the military that he claimed to love but repeatedly tried to escape. Witt's death is both a defiant act of individuation – even in the way it denies the combat that higher-ranked officers desired – and one that binds him inextricably to Charlie Company as one of the lives that Tall earlier mentioned sacrificing. The moments immediately following his death echo Malick's initial invocation of the colonial gaze, as the Melanesians are again shown swimming in the ocean (**Shot 2.28**), this time accompanied by Witt (**Shot 2.29**). His introduction underscored his separation from the Melanesians, while his death indicates some degree of fellowship with them. These shots indicate that Witt has become something more – or less – than “an army,” separating himself from the rhetoric that initially defined his character. Witt's death continues Malick's commentary on individuality's role within the military and the interaction of different races during wartime.

Welsh's actions following Witt's death suggest a synthesis of his views with Witt's. When Welsh stands at Witt's grave, he seems to have hardened even further, saying, “Where's your spark now?” in response to Witt's previous comment that he could “still see a spark” in Welsh. That element presents one final contrast between Malick and Spielberg's films in their strikingly different treatment of gravestones. Witt's grave (**Shot 2.27**) is associated with the natural world and the military, but it is also here connected to Welsh's grief. It stands in complete contrast to Captain Miller's grave (**Shot 2.30**), which is granted only positive connotations of dignity and community, with the sacrifice of his life justified by his accomplished goal. However, soon after, Welsh's voiceover suggests a change in

perspective, as he says, “There’s only one thing a man can do. Find something that’s his. Make an island for himself. If I never meet you in this life, let me feel the lack. A glance from your eyes, and my life will be yours.” The first few sentences are consistent with Welsh’s previous perspective, but the latter half shows him considering forces outside himself. Welsh ends the film with a strikingly moderate opinion; he remains firm and self-sufficient, but his openness tempers that previously excessive tendency. His shift toward moderation is perfectly in line with the film’s themes, because while there are multiple questions about the universe throughout the film, as Bersani and Dutroit note, “the film’s response will be non-discursive. Language raises questions which Malick’s film suggests language may be inherently unable to answer” (134). Bersani and Dutoit here indicate the central – and intentional – ambivalence at the centre of the film, which would betray its own commitment to multiple perspectives if it presumed to offer final closure. *The Thin Red Line*’s soldiers ask questions of a universe which offers them no answers, in the same way that Malick refuses to offer any definitive resolution.

The film’s final image shows a palm shoot growing on the beach (**Shot 2.31**) that was just recently a warzone. The shoot appears to be thriving despite the hostile environment, but Malick’s central framing emphasises the grimmer tones and emptiness surrounding it, leaving its survival uncertain. The image recalls Welsh’s earlier assertion that there is “not some other world out there where everything’s going to be okay. There’s just this one, just this rock.” In its original context, the dialogue expressed Welsh’s hardened nature and cynicism. The final shot simultaneously suggests a newfound openness and the continued distance from those around him. It continues Malick’s refusal to reduce a character or situation to an uncomplicated viewpoint, showing the change in Welsh without forgetting his specific circumstances. *The Thin Red Line*’s denouement is cautiously optimistic, privileging

character and landscape over history or narrative, conclusively demonstrating its status as a story more about humans confronting their place in the world than the war itself.

Reframing Colonial Perspectives: The Feminine Trajectory of *The New World*

The New World expands upon the subversive representations of gender and race that Malick briefly explored in *The Thin Red Line*. The film's narrative depicts the initial encounter between the Powhatan and the settlers who attempt to colonise Virginia. *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World* both present fictionalised versions of historical events, leading to intricate narratives and extensive runtimes. The primary difference between the films is their configuration of perspectives: *The Thin Red Line* offers brief voiceovers from a male soldier's wife and a Japanese soldier, with the bulk of the voiceover and narrative attention going to American soldiers. In contrast, *The New World* presents three central characters who dictate their thoughts through voiceover narration: Pocahontas (Q'orianka Kilcher), John Smith (Colin Farrell), and John Rolfe (Christian Bale).¹³ Although the film details Pocahontas's romantic encounters with these two men, it is also an intimate portrait of her experiences with colonialism, assimilation, and eventually death. Although two of its three central characters are male, *The New World* gradually reveals a perspective that is coded both as female and Native American. The comparisons between *The Thin Red Line* and *The New World*'s treatments of gender and race are not intended as a criticism, as they work to different ends; the former film establishes the combat film's masculine preoccupations before puncturing them with external perspectives, while *The New World* juxtaposes different cultures through the perspectives of its characters, necessitating its prismatic approach. Malick's choice to frame the narrative from both Native American and settler perspectives is a reflection of the film's nuanced exploration of love, but it also enforces a kind of equality between male and female characters in an attempt to revise traditional historical representation. *The New World* is Malick's most unabashedly feminist film, focusing

¹³ Pocahontas is never addressed by name within the film, but she is credited as such, so she will be referred to accordingly.

intimately on a marginalised woman's struggles amidst a broader social and historical context, in the process subverting the biographical film's typical representation of history.

The New World depicts the founding of Jamestown, Virginia and the clash between the English settlers and the Native American Powhatan tribe, focusing specifically on Pocahontas's relationships with two settlers, John Smith and John Rolfe. The film begins with the Powhatan – including Pocahontas – witnessing the arrival of three English ships, one of which carries Captain John Smith in chains. Although he has been sentenced to death, Smith is quickly pardoned by Captain Newport (Christopher Plummer), and the English establish a camp, intending to found a colony. After an initial period of tenuous peace and optimism, the English are plagued by disease, food shortages, and escalating conflicts with the Powhatan. Smith is captured by the Powhatan while attempting to establish a trade relationship, but he is seemingly saved from execution when Pocahontas stands between Smith and his apparent executor. Smith subsequently lives peacefully with the Powhatan, and falls in love with Pocahontas. He is eventually returned to Jamestown with the understanding that his people will leave in the spring, although the settlers only survive the harsh winter due to Pocahontas covertly providing supplies. Upon Smith's return, he is appointed governor after the man who had taken power in his absence is killed. When spring arrives and the English show no sign of leaving, Pocahontas' father – the tribe's chief – orders an attack on the settlement and exiles Pocahontas for her insubordination. After a brutal conflict, the settlers organise a trade for Pocahontas, thinking her presence will protect them from further loss. When Smith opposes the trade, his title is stripped from him. Pocahontas and Smith renew their love affair, but he is conflicted by the king's offer to lead his own expedition, and instructs another settler to tell Pocahontas he died while sailing. A distraught Pocahontas continues her life in Jamestown, eventually marrying and having a child with a settler named John Rolfe. Their love is tested when she discovers that Smith is still alive, and she meets

with him when she and Rolfe return to London. However, their reunion makes the emotional distance between them apparent, and Pocahontas returns to Rolfe, affirming her love for him. The two plan to return to Virginia, but Pocahontas dies before the voyage, with her final voiceover narration indicating her contentment. *The New World* retells Pocahontas and John Smith's story, but it also chronicles their separation and Pocahontas' eventual happiness with another man.

John Smith's accounts of his experiences in Virginia have been disputed due to their inconsistencies, but there has never been a conclusive interpretation of events. Smith wrote extensively of his time in Virginia, but the most widely scrutinised texts are 1608's *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Happened in Virginia* and 1624's *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New England & the Summer Isles*. Both texts relay Smith's account of his time in Virginia, but there are numerous discrepancies between them. In particular, the account of his capture by the Powhatan is entirely changed by his writings in 1624. In Smith's earlier *True Relation*, he details a largely amicable capture, claiming that "though 8 ordinarily guarded me, I wanted not what they could devise to content me: and still our longer acquaintance increased our better affection" (45). In his extensive study of Smith's writings, historian Leo Lemay examines the revision in Smith's claim in 1624 that after "concluding a ritual, Powhatan condemned Smith to death. Pocahontas pleaded for his life, and when the warriors were about to beat out his brains, she covered his head with hers" (xiv). These events are completely absent from Smith's writings of his experiences in 1608. Lemay details the contradictions of Smith's accounts – including his letters – in an attempt to ascertain the truth of his experiences. He notes that *A True Relation* "was the first published tract about the new colony. For reasons concerning public relations, the Virginia company officials wanted the Indians to seem friendly. The Virginia Company editor, John Healey, admitted that he cut parts of Smith's report" (19). Lemay presents a range of convincing

conclusions regarding the veracity of Smith's writing, suggesting that the inconsistencies may have been the result of extensive editing, or perhaps his own masculine pride at being saved by a young girl (27). There is also the possibility that Smith misinterpreted his experiences, as "one traditional reason for believing that Pocahontas saved Smith is that such a ritual of death, sponsorship, and rebirth is typical of adoption into an Indian tribe" (Lemay 63). These factors make it impossible to understand John Smith's experiences in Virginia with any certainty.¹⁴ Pocahontas and Smith's relationship has been obscured by the contradictions in Smith's writings, which render their narrative an uneasy synthesis of fact and possible fiction.

Although this analysis will focus primarily on *The New World's* 172-minute cut, it is necessary to briefly outline the alterations between the two main cuts, leaving aside the 150-minute cut that has received only limited release.¹⁵ The extended 172-minute cut integrates title cards which regularly disrupt the film's diegesis.¹⁶ Their inclusion incorporates a novelistic aspect that undermines any objective representation of history, forcing the spectator to acknowledge the film as a mediated version of historical events instead of an objective account. *The New World's* shorter 135-minute cut also denies objective representation, but the extended cut's title cards accentuate its subjectivity in their evocation of something resembling novelistic chapter titles. There are numerous additions in the extended cut that slightly alter the narrative's content, although there are too many to discuss on an individual basis. The greater emphasis placed on Smith's screen time with the

¹⁴ It should be noted that by the end of his study, Lemay writes that he "became convinced beyond a reasonable doubt that [Smith] told the truth" (3).

¹⁵ There are three known versions of the film. Its release was initially scheduled for November 2005, but Malick delayed release to complete editing, after which the 150 minute cut was released in December 2005. Michaels's account of the film's pre-release history states that "Malick withdrew the film to make additional cuts of about seventeen minutes (reducing the running time to 2:15) prior to a more general January release" (84). Later, a 172-minute version labelled "The Extended Cut" was released on DVD and Blu-ray. The 172 minute and 135 minute cuts are widely available for home viewing. A 150 minute cut has faced a very limited release.

¹⁶ In order, the film's chapters are: "A New Start," "The Stranger," "The President. Fall 1608," "A Secret Crop," "Return of the Floating Islands," "A Proposal," "Far to the North. Fall 1916," "London. Summer 1916," and "And Last."

Powhatan indicates his integration among them in scenes such as one where Smith saves a child from drowning. However, the most significant changes involve Pocahontas's characterisation. The first comes after Smith leaves Virginia, seemingly showing her considering suicide before resolving to carry on. The second is a brief conversation with her uncle near the film's conclusion where she asserts her status as her father's daughter, despite her exile. These scenes consolidate the film's existence as a story about Pocahontas's life and struggles instead of a conventional love story. The changes in *The New World*'s extended cut are thematically substantial in their alternate presentation of Pocahontas.

Verisimilitude and Contested Accounts in the Biopic Genre

The biographical film – or biopic – is defined by a tendency to privilege individuals over context and by its relaxed treatment of historical verisimilitude. Georges Méliès's *Joan of Arc* (1900) provides an early example of the genre, establishing its longevity within the medium. Classifications are necessarily loose, as biopics can focus on any era. Genre theorists Tom Brown and Belén Vidal offer a credible definition in their conception of the biopic genre as focusing on “a figure whose existence is documented in history, and whose claims to fame or notoriety warrant the uniqueness of his or her story” (3). The genre tends to de-emphasise historical context, except to the extent that it directly impacts central figures. Brown and Vidal differentiate biopics from other “film genres placed at the intersection of fiction and history, such as the epic, the costume film, or the docudrama – all of which may feature historical characters and biographical tropes – in the biopic an individual's story comes to the fore” (3). Critics have noted a certain tendency toward historical revisionism to construct conventionally entertaining narratives. Although Brown and Vidal present a largely positive account of the genre, they acknowledge that it is sometimes charged as “cavalier in its handling of historical fact and mired in its own sense of self-importance” (2-3). Despite these criticisms, biopics have endured with audiences, with a number of them released yearly,

often highlighting a historical figure's triumph over adversity. Biopics can utilise any period's signifiers, but their focus on the individual differentiates them from other superficially fact-based genres.

The New World's emphasis on individuals over events and lack of veracity regarding historical truths places it within the biopic genre. Malick's crew aimed for verisimilitude in its meticulous reconstruction of Jamestown and Virginia. Journalist Scott Bowles's press piece, published around the time *The New World's* release, details the film's production process:

the sets [were] constructed only with wood available in the Virginia forests. Costumes for the Indian tribes were hand-stitched with materials available at the time on the colonial settlements. He used no artificial lighting for most of the film, relying on sunlight to illuminate his outdoor sets. ("It's a brave 'New World' for Malick")

Bowles's profile establishes Malick's extensive efforts to achieve verisimilitude in *The New World's* mise-en-scène. These efforts initially seem somewhat at odds with the film's loose adaptation of historical events, which have led to some criticism. Feminist theorist Angela M. Ross's thesis – which examines various representations of Pocahontas – asserts that *The New World* "paints a disturbingly cliché-ridden and historically inaccurate portrait of Pocahontas" (105). Her response to the film assumes that it is intended as an objective historical document. Like Bowles, anthropology scholar Deborah Boehm profiled the film upon its release, noting that its publicity "has made it clear that *The New World* is not a factual rendering, but rather a dramatization 'inspired by the legend'" (76).¹⁷ The film's marketing materials indicated an emphasis on romance over verisimilitude, which is consistent with

¹⁷ A title card at the end of the film's credits states the film is "based on actual historical events and public records. Dialogue, certain events and characterisations contained in the film were created for the purposes of dramatization." Precise public records are not specified, further indicating that Malick did not intend for the film to be judged on its historical verisimilitude.

Malick's refusal of classical Hollywood's illusion of reality.¹⁸ *The New World* does not present an overview of history, instead locating the spectator within its characters' perspectives. It is a similar approach to *The Thin Red Line*'s self-conscious representation of historical events. *The New World*'s emphasis on subjectivity over history – with its realistic mise-en-scène sharply at odds with its mythic representation of history and evocation of perspectives – makes it impossible to invest in the film as an objective document.

Malick's account of Pocahontas' life mixes historical realism and myth, self-consciously presenting the narrative in a non-objective manner. *The New World* increases Pocahontas's age by several years, as her historical counterpart was thirteen years old when she met John Smith. Many historians, including Boehm, have argued that "there is no historical evidence that his and Pocahontas's love for each other was ever anything but platonic" (75).¹⁹ The inconsistency of Smith's writing and subsequent suggestions of unreliability highlight the impossibility of truly understanding a woman who lived so long ago, and left no first-hand record of her own experience. Even Pocahontas's appearance is largely unknown, as she was largely undocumented within her lifetime:

Only one likeness of her was produced in her lifetime, a 1616 engraving made by Simon van de Passe during her stay in London. Subsequent visual recreations of Pocahontas found her with increasingly anglicised features, moving her image farther from the life of an indigenous woman and closer to a Euroamerican fantasy construct. (Ross 10)

Pocahontas's image and life have consistently been appropriated and misrepresented, stripping her of agency. In contrast to traditional representations of Pocahontas, Malick

¹⁸ Academic and film critic David Sterritt's profile on Malick and *The New World* notes a producer's statement that "'first and foremost we've created a love story'" ("Film, Philosophy, and Terrence Malick's *The New World*").

¹⁹ As early as the 1850s and 1860s, figures including Henry Adams, Charles Deane and Gorham Palfrey questioned the veracity of Smith's account. A thorough account of responses to Smith's writings can be found in J. A. Leo Lemay's *Did Pocahontas Save Captain John Smith?*

scholar Robert Sinnerbrink refers to the film as “a work of cinematic thinking that attempts to transform the familiar Pocahontas legend by presenting the historical encounter between Old and New Worlds in the register of poetic myth” (*New Philosophies of Film* 181). Although Malick replicates various romanticised aspects of Pocahontas’s legend, he does so in a self-conscious manner that questions the distance between history and representation. *The New World* presents a fictionalised account of Pocahontas’s life in a manner that foregrounds its own construction.

Conjuring Romantic Love

Malick parallels Smith and Pocahontas through crosscutting during the opening scenes, while also establishing the film’s oneiric tone. The film opens with printed text that is accredited to John Smith: “How much they err, that think everyone which has been at Virginia understands or knows what Virginia is.”²⁰ His proclamation establishes the film’s inherent subjectivity in its indication that Smith perceived Virginia differently than others. It also highlights Smith’s conflict – as presented within Malick’s narrative – between his colonial perspective and the indigenous perspective that he comes to identify with. These words are followed by a leisurely sequence that establishes the film’s intentions. It introduces several Powhatan women, including Pocahontas, swimming peacefully, while simultaneously showing approaching English ships. Sinnerbrink correctly asserts that the sequence leads to the viewer being “thoroughly immersed in the strange liminal space and time between history and myth” (*New Philosophies of Film* 179). Malick’s films study the interrelation between objective history and subjective myth, but *The New World*’s focus on recognisable, named historical entities and events makes its exploration of this binary most explicit. The film’s

²⁰ Historical scholar David Nicol discusses the origin of this quote in “Understanding Virginia.” In its original context, Smith was apparently complaining about incompetent mapmakers. By taking the quote out of context, Malick transforms it into a philosophical meditation on the nature of subjectivity that introduces the manner in which his film adapts history.

opening shot shows a gently rippling body of water (**Shot 3.1**), which simultaneously expresses the settlers' impending arrival and the peace preceding that event. During the shot, Pocahontas is introduced through voiceover narration, reciting, "Come, spirit. Help us sing the story of our land. You are our mother, we your field of corn. We rise from out of the soul of you." Her voiceover introduces the film's spiritual concerns, which are quickly elaborated upon when she continues, "You filled the land with your beauty. You reach to the end of the world. How should I seek you? Show me your face." The narration establishes Pocahontas's central conflict, which recurs throughout the film as she attempts to find the "Mother" figure within her life. Immediately following her narration, Pocahontas is shown raising her arms into the sky (**Shot 3.2**), invoking the figure she speaks to. Smith is subsequently introduced chained in a ship's hold, raising his hands to catch the water dripping from above (**Shot 3.3**). This compositional mirroring visually associates Pocahontas and Smith, linking them in the spectator's mind. Although two of the three most significant characters are introduced in this sequence, it is slow and dense with thematic connections and style. Philosophical theorist Martin Donougho claims that "plot and character become mere vehicles for Malick's poetic cinema and its larger thematic or formal concerns" (366). Donougho's assertion captures the abstraction of narrative events within Malick's style, but it elides the director's ability to create complex and subtle characterisations. That ability is seen in the early introduction of another of the film's thematic preoccupations: Pocahontas interacts freely with the natural world, while Smith is literally chained down away from it. Their differences establish the Powhatan's relationship to the land, and the settlers' aversion to the natural world. *The New World*'s leisurely prologue emphasises thematic content over narrative progression, visually linking and subtly characterising its central figures.

The New World's aesthetic conveys the feeling of romantic love, with the editing suggesting its characters' sensory impressions. Donougho claims that the film's "narrative

spacing is often disjointed, and cuts between shots are abrupt, unmotivated by situation or character” (366). However, the fragmented editing can be read as conveying the feeling of love, which grows clear during the depiction of Pocahontas and Smith’s growing intimacy. Their relationship is not explicitly sexual, but it is largely structured around tactility. One particular sequence (**Shots 3.4-3.10**) shows Pocahontas and Smith touching one another. The framing, jump cuts and lack of dialogue stress the sensations of their physical contact. Their surroundings are almost obscured – in contrast to Malick’s usual focus on natural landscapes – thereby focusing our attention on Pocahontas and Smith’s fixation on one another.

Sinnerbrink explores the film’s formation of an “aesthetic context [...] of a naïve style, which refers to a conscious attempt to produce this kind of untutored, spontaneous, child-like or ‘primitive’ vision of the world” (*New Philosophies of Film* 183). In this context, the misrepresentation of historical fact and focus on individuals over events enhances *The New World*’s thematic considerations, reflecting Pocahontas and Smith’s infatuated inability to look beyond each other. *The New World*’s form matches its content in its aesthetic embodiment of Pocahontas and Smith’s innocent love.

The representation of Pocahontas’s initial rescue of Smith highlights the narrative’s subjectivity, allowing for the possibility of unreliable narration. When Smith is captured by the Powhatan, he is taken to a gathering. Much of what follows is ambiguously presented, as the Powhatan remain largely silent as Smith defends himself, placing the spectator firmly within his perspective. Smith is restrained and a Powhatan man runs at him, wielding a club (**Shot 3.11**). Malick cuts to black for several seconds, pointedly disrupting the film’s diegesis. The next shot shows Smith gazing upwards (**Shot 3.12**), before revealing that he is observing the light streaming in through a hole in the ceiling (**Shot 3.13**), an image with connotations of divine intervention. In voiceover narration, he speaks the line, “At the moment I was to die she threw herself upon me,” before showing Pocahontas protecting Smith from being harmed

(Shot 3.14). Film theorist David Nicol provides close analysis of the sequence, coming to the conclusion that the “jarring editing, the sudden changes of mood, and the elision of information repeatedly suggest that things are happening for reasons that the viewer cannot fully understand” (“Understanding Virginia”). The film’s subjectivity suggests the possibility of Smith’s exaggeration or misunderstanding of the events that befall him, as Lemay’s analysis of Smith’s writings also proposed. It also recalls the film’s opening quote, evoking the multiplicity of perspectives that comprise history, while also suggesting the fallibility that comes when an individual attempts to interpret another person or group’s actions. Pocahontas’s rescue of Smith is figured from his unreliable perspective, encouraging the spectator to question his experience.

Malick employs various approaches – such as nested frames and the representation of nature – to assert *The New World*’s mediated approach to history. Emmanuel Lubezki’s cinematography presents the film as a story for the spectator to peruse. Sinnerbrink’s description of a shot in the opening sequence captures Malick’s intent:

A porthole image – a frame within the film frame – shows the ships sailing into harbour from yet another perspective beneath the surface of things. Here and throughout the film there are recurring images of framing, of the world viewed, subtly drawing attention to this cinematic framing of a mythic historical encounter. (*New Philosophies of Film* 179)

The various perspectives as the boats sail in implicitly acknowledge the impossibility of reducing the situation to an objective historical event. Additionally, images of the natural world regularly disrupt the film’s narrative. This is hardly a new development in Malick’s oeuvre, but here the representation of nature often completely overwhelms the narrative. Film scholar Eric Patrick articulates one of the fundamental aspects of Malick’s work in his description of the way the spectator is “continually pulled from the diegesis into isolated

views of plants and insects [...], or secluded shots of trees, sky and the elements that don't bear any direct correlation to the narrative space" (407). The focus on the natural world is apt, given the juxtaposition of the settlers and the Powhatan through their relationship to the world around them, but it also brings an element of distance that makes it impossible to engage with the narrative as objectively historical. *The New World* foregrounds its stylisation by integrating frames within frames and disrupting the narrative to focus on the natural world.

John Smith and Colonialism

Smith shares qualities with the men who have populated Malick's oeuvre, most closely resembling *The Thin Red Line*'s Witt. The similarities between Witt and Smith begin in their respective introductions. Witt is enjoying life with the Melanesian people after going AWOL, before being discovered and disciplined by a senior officer. Smith is introduced emerging from the shadows as the sounds of clanking chains dominate the sound mix (**Shot 3.3**). After Captain Newport pardons Smith, it is revealed that Smith was imprisoned for making mutinous remarks. Each film demonstrates its male protagonist's scorn for hegemonic patriarchal culture and inability to escape it. The protagonists of *Badlands* and *Days of Heaven*, Kit and Bill, respectively, are defined by their refusal to face the consequences of their actions, in contrast to Witt and Smith's reluctant conformity. Despite his ambivalence, Witt participates in combat following his capture, actively asking to fight in the battle for Hill 210. Similarly, Smith continues as governor after returning to Jamestown, even while considering escaping to be with Pocahontas again. Sinnerbrink articulates Smith's conflict between "an idealised conception of romantic love which expresses his communal belonging with the Powhatan, and his sense of moral and military responsibility for his fellows in the struggling fort-colony of Jamestown" (*New Philosophies of Film* 187). Although he finds his greatest happiness with the Powhatan, he eventually prioritises his

society over his individuality. Malick's male protagonists share an inability to fit into conventional society, defined against a hegemonic majority that they cannot assimilate into.

As in his previous films, Malick continues to undermine masculine perspectives, although his location of a female character at his narrative's centre represents a departure from his previous films. *The Thin Red Line* critiques Witt for mythologising the Melanesian people, while Smith is also critiqued for his treatment of Pocahontas. Ross analyses Pocahontas and Smith's relationship at length, noting that "his fantasies equate her with nature. At one point, Smith even calls her 'my America' – she is literally interchangeable with the land of The New World" (140-1). Ross argues that the film vindicates Smith's beliefs, but those beliefs do not necessarily line up with Malick's. Malick has consistently interrogated male perspectives, even as they dominate his narratives. Smith fits easily into the tradition that Kit, Bill, and Witt established before him, but there are crucial differences. The aforementioned characters feature in narratives which conclude – or at least begin their epilogues – upon their deaths. Malick's most radical deviation from his typical narrative arc is that Smith is not killed, but assimilated into the society that he previously opposed. Literary scholar Seán Easton notes that when Smith makes "the traditional epic hero's choice to continue his quest, he forfeits his role as protagonist" (79). Smith survives in *The New World*, but sacrifices his prominence within its narrative. His acceptance of hegemonic culture is heavily foreshadowed, with even the heights of Smith's romance denoting colonialism. During a voiceover reverie about love, he asks, "Shall we not take what is given to us?" The line evokes colonial greed, calling to mind the settlers' presumptuous actions in claiming Virginia for themselves. Smith's characterisation continues Malick's exploration of masculinity, but *The New World* is his first film that does not centre its narrative progression exclusively on masculine figures.

Although *The New World* evokes colonialism within Smith and Pocahontas's relationship, its structure enforces equality between them. As previously mentioned, the prologue depicts Pocahontas praying to a mother figure. Much of the subsequent half hour's voiceover is given to John, establishing his optimistic hopes for Virginia. Cultural theorist Monica Siebert correctly notes that Native American and settler perspectives "are given roughly equal time and space during the film's opening sequences, and this balancing act continues throughout the film as Malick's classic voiceovers constantly shift among settler and native protagonists" (144). From Pocahontas and Smith's first encounter to his final departure, their voiceovers are given equal weight, as their responsibilities overwhelm the romantic idyll they created together. While Smith lives with the Powhatan, Jamestown goes completely unseen for around thirty minutes, confirming that the film is more interested in its lovers' perspectives than historical verisimilitude. The section is entitled "The Stranger," which could be read from either character's perspective, although it seems more plausible from Pocahontas and the tribe's, as it depicts Smith drawing closer to the Powhatan generally as well as Pocahontas specifically. However, much of the film supports Pocahontas's assertion that they are "two no more. One. One. I am," with Pocahontas and Smith finding their way back to each other repeatedly, despite their struggles. The *New World*'s structure and distribution of voiceovers supports Pocahontas and Smith's love, demonstrating in form and content their closeness and reinforcing the film's presentation of subjective perspectives.

Smith's departure reveals *The New World* as Pocahontas's narrative instead of a lovers' tale. Their inevitable separation is paralleled in the rising tension between their people, with their utopian idyll crushed by the weight of history bearing down upon it. The swooning tone that Malick previously invoked was only an endorsement of romantic passion in as far as it embodied the lovers' perspectives. Sinnerbrink captures the film's complexity with his assertion that although *The New World* "is generically a love story, much of the film

deals with the difficulty of the nuptials between worlds: the conflicts, corruptions, betrayals and battles that have defined the bloody history of colonial contact” (*New Philosophies of Film* 188). Pocahontas and Smith’s love affair is disrupted when Smith is called away by an irresistible colonial instinct, further inscribing their relationship with his people’s ways. In their study of Hollywood’s representation of Native American identities, film historians Peter C. Rollins and John E. O’Connor assert that Hollywood films have historically “rediscovered their own ‘lost innocence’ vicariously through another Hollywood Indian” (10-11). Although Rollins and O’Connor are discussing the film industry itself, it is interesting that *The New World* shows Smith temporarily finding his “innocence” with a Native American woman, before abandoning her due to an inexorable colonial impulse. It also deepens the connection between Smith and Witt, as both men mythologise the foreign race they encounter. The shot of Pocahontas desolate as Smith’s boat sails away (**Shot 3.15**) frames the loss from her perspective and mirrors her observation of the settlers’ approach in the prologue. It recalls Pocahontas and Smith’s respective associations with the land and sea, suggesting that Smith is erasing his experiences with Pocahontas with his departure. That element makes Smith’s subsequent absence even more noteworthy, enabling Easton’s interpretation of the film “as an *Odyssey* in which John Smith comes to Virginia as an Odysseus figure, yet passes that mantle to Pocahontas who makes her own great journey, not only into the life of the English settlers in Virginia, but to England itself” (78). Easton’s analysis of Pocahontas’s characterisation also articulates her increased centrality to the narrative after Smith’s departure. In retrospect, it is not Smith who ultimately functions as *The New World*’s analogue to Witt, but Pocahontas. Like Smith, she is both of and separate from her people, but unlike Smith, her peaceful death indicates her film’s conclusion, associating her with Witt. Smith’s departure re-orientates the narrative around Pocahontas’s perspective, with the film revealing itself not as the story of their love, but of Pocahontas herself.

Malick uses the opening piece entitled “Vorspiel” from Richard Wagner’s opera *Das Rheingold* as a musical motif, bookending the narrative as well as underlining Pocahontas and Smith’s romance. The piece is played three times, with its meaning shifting in each iteration. In the prologue, it simultaneously communicates the settlers’ wonder at discovering Virginia and the Powhatan women’s ease within nature. The second instance coincides with the zenith of Pocahontas and Smith’s romance, when she asks, “What else is life, but being near you?”, affirming their passionate love for one another. The final refrain indicates the peace Pocahontas has found despite her death, while also suggesting Rolfe’s return to Virginia, mirroring the first usage coinciding with the settlers’ initial arrival. There is a contrast between the piece’s repetitions, with the second indicating Pocahontas and Smith’s unity while the first and third can be read from the dual perspectives of the settlers and the Powhatan. The different configurations delineate the racial differences that drive the narrative, except during the respite of Pocahontas and Smith’s romance. The arc of that romance is reflected in the original narrative of “Vorspiel”:

[...] in which three Rhine maidens swim happily together, just before the Nibelung dwarf, Alberich, discovers them. When they realise he desires them, they each in turn mock him. Embittered, Alberich steals the Rhine gold that the maidens are charged to protect and forswears love, which – he has learned from them – is the price he must pay for using gold to rule the world. (Easton 71)

The story of “Vorspiel” reflects *The New World*’s themes. During the first instance of “Vorspiel,” Malick cuts to Pocahontas and two other Powhatan women swimming (**Shot 3.16**), aligning them with the Rhine maidens. In this context, the dwarf Alberich is a representation of the settlers, who spend their time in nature searching for gold. More specifically, Smith himself functions as an analogue for Alberich, forswearing love for the sake of discovery and other potential gain. The presence of *Das Rheingold*’s “Vorspiel” as a

musical motif indicates *The New World*'s shifting focus, but also enhances its consideration of colonialism.

Female Agency in Colonial Contexts

Stereotypical representations of Native American women idealise or demonise them based on their relationship to their people. Pocahontas fits into the “princess” archetype, which fetishises Native American women as beautiful objects, while also demanding that they divorce themselves from their cultural heritage. The princess archetype as constructed by American culture was an abstracted ideal that no woman could fulfil, insisting that she disavow her people, often for the love of a white settler. Joseph Croswell’s play *A New World Planted* (1802) states: “I know she’s browner than European dames/But whiter far, than other natives are” (20).²¹ Croswell’s text encapsulates the way Native American women could simultaneously be elevated above their own people while still being considered as inferior to white people. Similarly, previous representations of Pocahontas have removed her agency by affirming her assimilation. Pearce’s examination of Charlotte Barnes’s play, *Forest Princess* (1848), indicates how thoroughly conceptions of Pocahontas have been defined by anglicised perceptions, showing her having “a savage vision of her Virginia home and its future – with Washington, the Genius of Columbia, Time, Peace, and the Lion and the Eagle all taking part in the final tableau” (175). This anachronistic tableau renders Pocahontas an abstracted piece of American history instead of a living woman. Native American women are often represented from a colonial perspective, which refuses to recognise their humanity unless the individual renounces their people.

The New World engages with traditional conceptions of Pocahontas’s life at the same time as revising those conceptions of her identity. The most iconic moment of Pocahontas’s

²¹ Historian Roy Harvey Pearce’s *Savagism and Civilisation: A Study of the Indian and the American Mind* examines various historic representations of Native American identities, including further detail surrounding Croswell’s *A New World Planted*.

myth – preventing Smith’s execution – occurs thirty minutes into the extended cut. As Michaels suggests, the event’s early placement indicates that Malick “finds a deeper significance in the aftermath of this event, in the princess’s cultural assimilation and role as ambassador to the capital of civilisation and in Smith’s lonely, frustrating career as a thwarted explorer of new worlds” (94-5). Disney’s *Pocahontas* (Gabriel and Goldberg, 1995) – probably the most well-known adaptation of Pocahontas’s life to date – does little to complicate Pocahontas and Smith’s relationship. It ends on the tragic note of Smith being wounded – while trying to save the Powhatan chief from the settlers’ governor – and leaving to seek medical attention, while Pocahontas stays with her people. In examining the representation of Native Americans in children’s entertainment, anthropologist Pauline Turner Strong notes that Pocahontas’s later life “does not resonate as well with an Anglo-American audience’s expectations as the legend of Smith’s capture and salvation by an innocent, loving, and self-sacrificing child of nature” (197). There was in fact a sequel to the original Disney film (Ellery and Raymond, 1998) which loosely adapted some of Pocahontas’s later life, while still heavily sanitising historical fact and avoiding the narrative’s cultural implications. Disney’s adaptation of these historical events condemns colonial actions, but John Smith – and his relationship with Pocahontas – remains conspicuously romanticised in their telling, as he is not viewed in the same context as the other settlers. As previously discussed, Malick’s conception of Pocahontas and Smith’s relationship is heavily inscribed with colonial connotations which make it impossible to separate Smith from his people. Their relationship is further nuanced after her assimilation. Pocahontas attempts to conform to his society’s conception of womanhood when she asks him, “Am I as you like?” in voiceover narration. The two maintain an equal share of the narrative focus, but the race and gender-based imbalances inscribed in their relationship are foregrounded. Their relationship was previously a positive and transformative force for

Smith, but their continued interaction after Pocahontas's assimilation requires an internalisation of colonial erasure. *The New World* differs from Disney's depiction of Pocahontas in its interweaving of the personal and the cultural that inevitably complicates her relationship with Smith.

Malick's repetition – and alteration – of the shot sequence in which Pocahontas initially saves Smith underlines the disparity of power between them. After Pocahontas has been traded to the settlers, Lubezki repeats the shot pattern of her early rescue of Smith (**Shots 3.11-3.14**). The sequence begins with a close-up of Pocahontas' face (**Shot 3.17**), before cutting to the ceiling of the building in which she is housed (**Shot 3.18**). These shots mirror the corresponding shots in the earlier sequence in both camera angle and content. Malick subsequently deviates from the earlier sequence in cutting to a long shot of Pocahontas (**Shot 3.19**). The shot falls in the same position in the sequence as Pocahontas's earlier rescue of Smith (**Shot 3.14**), but Malick's self-conscious revision of the sequence here emphasises isolation instead of rescue due to the relative sparseness of the mise-en-scène. Pocahontas looks to the sky, just as Smith did, but she cannot rely on any aid from Smith or her people. Although Smith still resides in Virginia at this point, the repeated shot pattern decisively rejects the film's earlier idyll, suggesting Smith's unreliability and foreshadowing his departure. The visual echo is one of the film's subtlest subtextual statements, with the first indicating Smith's potential unreliable narration and the film's romantic tone, and the second announcing a less romantic context and Smith's literal unreliability as a partner. However, the sequence contains a suggestion of hope, in that it also recalls the earlier shot of Pocahontas reaching her arms into the sky (**Shot 3.2**), seemingly stressing her increasing self-reliance. These sequences also indicate the narrative's shifting priorities; Smith's centrality within the earlier sequence indicates that the film is telling the story of his romance with Pocahontas, while the second sequence demarcates a shift towards Pocahontas's perspective.

A mirrored shot pattern demonstrates the film's varied tonal registers, decisively ending Pocahontas and Smith's romantic reverie.

Pocahontas is eventually absorbed into English culture, with those around her attempting to remove her agency. Cultural theorist Rayna Green discusses the only known representation of Pocahontas made within her lifetime, which “shows the Princess in Elizabethan dress, complete with ruff and velvet hat – the Christian, English lady the ballad expects her to become and the lady she indeed became for her English husband and her faithful audiences for all time” (158). Green's description of the likeness emphasises how thoroughly Pocahontas has been divorced from her original cultural context, even as she stands as a symbol of interracial connection. By the time her portrait was painted, Pocahontas had taken the name Rebecca Rolfe and been assimilated into the English culture. The erasure of identity and culture implicit in her assimilation is another factor that makes her truly unknowable, obscured by layers of myth, fabrication and fashion, even within her lifetime. Within Malick's narrative, Pocahontas is exiled and traded to the settlers after her perceived betrayal. She reunites with Smith, but his subsequent deception regarding his death robs Pocahontas of the capacity to address their relationship's conclusion on her own terms. Although Smith later seems to regret his actions, they convey the gendered and racial power that he holds within the film's narrative. Easton perceptively articulates the tendency of historical films to focus on male perspectives and “relegate a woman in Pocahontas's position either to the role of victim, however sympathetic, or possession” (69). Malick combats this impulse, refusing to portray Pocahontas as a victim or another man's accessory. After her assimilation, she wears clothing (**Shot 3.20**) similar to other English women (**Shot 3.21**), but her association with natural landscapes mitigates our ability to see her as an Englishwoman.²²

²² The representation of a Powhatan man who finds his way into Jamestown encapsulates Malick's ambivalence towards assimilation. The settlers accept him, albeit with some condescending jocularity. A complex shot frames him against the settlers' fence in traditional garb (**Shot 3.22**), with the matching colours

Malick depicts the uncomfortable process of assimilation while placing Pocahontas within her original cultural context.

Malick's representation of Pocahontas refuses to corroborate her assimilation. His Pocahontas defines her own identity even within the confines of colonial oppression. The extended cut works even more ardently towards defining her self-sufficiency, showing Pocahontas saying, "Come, death. Set me free" in voiceover narration after Smith's departure. These words indicate intense personal suffering, but she subsequently has an epiphany and has a moment of connection with the natural world (**Shot 3.23**). As previously argued, Malick's compositions during Pocahontas and Smith's romance (**Shots 3.4-3.10**) implied a lessening of her connection to the natural world. In contrast, the scenes following his departure indicate a renewal of that connection. Malick cuts to Pocahontas bathing herself in the ocean (**Shot 3.24**), symbolically washing away her grief. She is as isolated from those around her as she was immediately following her imprisonment (**Shots 3.17-3.19**), but her independence and resilience of spirit are emphasised. Angela M. Ross takes issue with the film's representation of gender and race, referring to it as "a story in which Pocahontas is lifted up from evident ruin to become simultaneously the poster child for the tobacco industry in Virginia and the mother of future Virginians" (149). The words "lifted up" efface the agency shown by *The New World*'s iteration of Pocahontas, who is exploited by various cultural forces, but retains her agency through strength of character. Soon after Pocahontas's recovery, we hear Rolfe's first voiceover, in which he says, "When I first saw her, she was regarded as someone finished, broken, lost." These words are not far removed from a shot before their meeting which shows Rolfe watching Pocahontas before they meet (**Shot 3.25**). The shot self-consciously frames Pocahontas's story not only for the audience's gaze, but

of the man and the fence suggesting unity. However, even those colonial settlements bear multiple connotations, as the Powhatan have so consistently been associated with Virginia, and its resources.

also indicates Rolfe's colonial gaze and presents a visual metaphor for Pocahontas's assimilation. The evocation of his gaze and the content of his voiceover suggest a colonial perspective which Malick rebukes, with his focus on Pocahontas indicating that her story is not yet complete. Michaels notes the ultimate refusal of Pocahontas's assimilation when she is "garbed in English dress, standing in a tall tree [**Shots 3.26-3.27**]. In these images as well as those of her cavorting in the formal gardens at court at the end of the film, Malick reflects the native woman's total assimilation within nature rather than the social world" (87-8).

Michaels is correct in noting the film's rejection of assimilation, but these shots locate Pocahontas at the boundary of both the natural and social worlds, in addition to explicitly gendered connotations. The placement of these shots – the first follows Pocahontas's marriage to Rolfe, while the second comes after her last meeting with Smith – implies a fundamental identity constructed in both racial and gendered terms. As portrayed by Malick, Pocahontas is not defined by her assimilation or her relationship to male figures, but her own agency. During a final conversation with her uncle, Pocahontas says, "Tell father I am his daughter still," rebuking her father's disavowal of their familial connection and asserting her own identity. The conversation and images reject the tendency to show Native Americans disavowing their people, suggesting a permanent bond with them. *The New World's* feminist conception of Pocahontas articulates her as inextricably connected to her people and an agent of her own destiny, regardless of her circumstances.

Pocahontas and Smith's assimilation into English culture connects them, despite their markedly different situations. There is an ironic reversal of fortune in Smith's willing but ultimately unsatisfying assimilation into dominant culture weighed against Pocahontas's eventual happiness with Rolfe. Captain Newport's optimistic rhetoric of striving tempts Smith, with the older man saying, "I remember when you had sight and ambition. Shall you not press on?" His statement ignores Smith's differences with the settlers and clearly

persuades him, perhaps in the way it suggests his association with American myths of discovery. Ross asserts that Malick “embraces the idea of reinvention of self that *The New World* affords – an idea that not uncoincidentally is part of today’s American mythology” (135). In contrast to that assertion, the American ideal of reinvention is explored in the film without being affirmed. During their last encounter, Pocahontas asks, “Did you find your Indies, John? You shall,” only to have him reply “I may have sailed past them” with a clear undercurrent of regret. Smith’s reinvention came with Pocahontas, yet his colonial instincts – although in line with American mythology – represent a regression to his former self, implying that reinvention is unsustainable. This point is underlined when Smith returns from the Powhatan camp and finds that a man named Wingfield (David Thewlis) has taken over as governor in his absence. When Wingfield attempts to assert his authority, another settler says, “His name is not even Wingfield. It’s Woodson. Woodson is the name. Left England under a cloud of disgrace.” The speaker is immediately detained, presenting Jamestown as a place where corrupt men strive transparently and futilely to reinvent themselves. It could be argued that Smith is more successful in his reinvention, except that he is semantically connected to Woodson. When Newport acquits Smith at the film’s beginning, he says, “Now remember, Smith. You come to these shores in chains. You’re under a cloud,” a statement that explicitly foreshadows the later dialogue regarding Woodson. Smith’s struggle is to reinvent himself, while Pocahontas’s is to maintain her identity while she is externally reinvented. As Easton indicates, she is ultimately more successful, as she “grows within and, eventually, beyond a traditional epic role to develop a perspective that envisions, evaluates, and selects from possible destinies. In the course of these experiences, she rejects self-destruction and loss of original identity” (79). Pocahontas’s agency is restricted by colonialism, but she fits those circumstances to her own identity, as opposed to Smith, who unsuccessfully attempts to force his identity into an ill-fitting hegemonic context. Ultimately, their primary difference is that

Pocahontas honours her identity, while Smith denies his. Pocahontas and Smith are mirrored in their assimilation into English culture, with their eventual fates reflecting their respective methods of self-definition.

Although Pocahontas has to adjust her perspective before connecting with Rolfe, their relationship is more personally fulfilling than her relationship with Smith. It is possible to map Pocahontas's personal satisfaction by analysing the voiceover narration addressed to the "mother" figure. At the beginning of the film, an unsatisfied Pocahontas asks the figure to "show me your face." The easiest way to romanticise Pocahontas's bond with Smith would be to indicate personal and spiritual satisfaction during their relationship. Instead, Pocahontas delivers voiceover narration during her romance with Smith, asking, "Mother. Where do you live? In the sky? In the clouds? The sea? Give me a sign." Her passionate love for Smith does not bring her peace as an individual. When she struggles to reciprocate Rolfe's romantic feelings, she asks, "Mother, why can I not feel as I should? Must?" Her love with Rolfe, and her satisfaction within herself, comes only when she accepts her identity. The film concludes with her death, but in her final voiceover, she states, "Mother, now I know where you live," fulfilling the arc that was established by her question at the start of the film. Easton asserts that Pocahontas "associates the Mother at first with John Smith, and then finally locates her in Thomas, her son with John Rolfe" (70). Easton's interpretation is potentially problematic, as it risks implying that Pocahontas's true purpose was to give birth, but it is crucial that she settled with Rolfe on her own terms, despite the colonial context. Her happiness is not tied to her son and husband, but her agency within her later relationships. Pocahontas's voiceover narration initially indicates her personal dissatisfaction, culminating in her eventual self-actualisation.

Malick endorses stability over desire, with Pocahontas's steady, practical relationship with Rolfe enduring instead of her passion with Smith. Smith and Rolfe's first encounters

with Pocahontas are framed identically: both men approach hesitantly from behind, with Pocahontas looking ahead on the right side of the frame, despite her demeanour indicating that she has noticed their presence (**Shots 3.28 and 3.29**). These similarly-composed frames reflect the two men's similar cultural contexts, and invite the spectator to compare them. Michaels notes that the film's narrative "involves a woman drawn to men representing different kinds of love, the erotic attraction embodied by the adventurer, Smith, versus the domesticated affections of the secure and stable Rolfe" (92-93). Here even more than earlier in his career, Malick defies traditional narrative construction: instead of contriving a conflict between the masculine figures that make up two sides of the triangle, Smith and Rolfe never share the screen. There is no animosity between them, and the focus remains solely on Pocahontas's decision. There is no ambiguity regarding Malick's eventual presentation of these relationships. The initial physical intimacy that defined Pocahontas and Smith's relationship (**Shots 3.4-3.10**) has dissipated by their final meeting, leaving them hushed and distant (**Shot 3.30**). The shot's composition self-consciously reflects their first meeting (**Shot 3.28**), with Smith remarking, "It seems as if I was speaking to you for the first time." The name of the earlier segment in which Smith and Pocahontas fall in love – "The Stranger" – gains greater resonance in hindsight, as Pocahontas and Smith eventually become strangers to each other once again. Her fleeting passion for Smith is secondary to her lasting affection for Rolfe, who respects her decision to meet with Smith, despite his misgivings. She and Rolfe also stand at the intersection of nature and culture, with Pocahontas as a Powhatan woman who has been assimilated into English culture, and Rolfe as a settler who tends the land. This is juxtaposed against Smith's repeated association with the sea, which is specifically figured as something which separates him from Pocahontas (**Shot 3.15**). Their relationships are also contrasted through dialogue, with Pocahontas's earlier sentiment that she and John were "two

no more” replaced with Rolfe’s statement that “There is that in her I shall not know.”²³ *The New World* juxtaposes Rolfe and Smith, acknowledging the temptation of Pocahontas’s passionate love with Smith before affirming her stability with Rolfe.

The “New World”

The New World shifts from its early mythopoeic register to a decidedly more grounded tone without becoming a realist narrative. Although the style consistently asserts a kind of swoony romanticism within its love story and depiction of natural beauty, the film’s post-idyll section focuses less on sensory impressions. Although Malick’s films have consistently been celebrated for their beauty, *The New World* has more at stake in its depiction of Virginia, as representing a utopian land could inadvertently justify colonial attitudes. Ross critiques Malick’s representation of Virginia, but Donougho incisively asserts that “the danger in asserting a providential innocence is one to which Malick’s films are constantly alert” (367). Throughout his oeuvre, Malick has portrayed numerous characters interpreting the natural world as an Edenic sanctuary, before inevitably stumbling into human drama. The settlers similarly mythologise Virginia, never considering potential dangers. Nature is presented as “both Edenic and depraved, peaceable and violent, to be embraced and to be tamed” (Donougho 366). Donougho’s perceptive reading of the film’s landscapes has direct parallels to Malick’s representation of the natural world in *The Thin Red Line*, which placed great weight on its character’s interactions with the natural world. This ambivalence prevents the film – and Malick’s oeuvre overall – from didacticism, approaching something closer to nature’s harsher truths. The settlers encroach upon the land without considering its difficulties and the film rebuffs their utopian optimism with the barren landscape in which

²³ Early in their relationship, he states in voiceover narration that “the loss of my wife and daughter has led me to understand her.” However, his presumed understanding is quickly complicated by a further musing that “Hours pass, and she speaks not a word. Who are you? What do you dream of?” Rolfe comes to understand that he may never fully understand Pocahontas’s perspective, and dedicates himself to her regardless.

they struggle to survive (**Shots 3.31-3.33**). These shots signify the onset of winter, but the contrast against the warmer colour palette on display during Pocahontas and Smith's romance (**Shots 3.4-3.10**) also indicates the film's tonal shift. In this sense, its narrative of romantic love becoming complicated by external factors is reflected in the depiction of a seemingly ideal land revealing its difficulties. Here, as in Malick's other films, nature is beautiful, but also indifferent to human suffering, preventing the film from depicting a colonial ideal. *The New World* initially presents nature as idyllic before slowly rejecting that fantasy, following the same arc of disillusionment as the narrative.

The New World presents a cynical consideration of the American dream. Upon landing, the settlers make broad utopian assertions, as when one man states, "I found oysters. They're as thick as my hands. They're the size of stones, sir, and there's fish everywhere. They're flapping against your legs. We're gonna live like kings!" As Michaels suggests, though, "these lofty claims immediately give way to the challenges of physical survival, and following a nearly disastrous winter, the distractions of commerce" (86). Even disregarding Virginia's day-to-day challenges, the settlers' in-fighting and conflicts with the Powhatan hinder them. Malick indicates the naiveté of their presumptions in his framing of the recently erected flag as subordinated by the natural world (**Shot 3.34**). Smith is especially guilty of mythologising Virginia, describing it as "a land where one might wash one's soul pure." Even as his voiceover establishes these lofty aspirations, Malick undercuts his mythic and naïve conception of life in Virginia by showing the settlers raiding Powhatan food stores. Smith's naiveté is undermined during his dreams about America's potential, but after a violent battle, the settlers' flag is prominently shown (**Shot 3.35**). The battle ends with the settlers retreating into the encampment, but the dominant framing of the flag states that America's foundational mythology is not reinvention or discovery, but violence and erasure. When he returns to Jamestown, Smith explicitly critiques the greed and violence which form

the settlement's core. Regarding money, he states "The source of all evil. It excuses vulgarity. Makes wrong right, base noble." Smith's inability to leave Jamestown even as he acknowledges its corruption is one of the film's most trenchant instances of cynicism. *The New World's* characters extol America's virtues and possibilities, even as the film establishes a pessimistic illustration of the American Dream.

The film's later sequences allow for alternate interpretations of its title which reflect other perspectives. Conventionally, "the new world" refers to the Americas, meaning that its most obvious association is the settlers' impressions of Virginia. However, Pocahontas's journey to London for an audience with the king and queen presents a second interpretation, denoting her perception of London. Upon her arrival, "her curious gaze at the black man in the marketplace and the caged raccoon at court mirrors the English royalty's appraisal of 'the New World's Princess'" (Michaels 88). Pocahontas's gaze (**Shot 3.36**) is contrasted against the more hostile gazes of London's white citizens. (**Shot 3.37**). Moreover, during her final conversation with her uncle, she states that "life has brought me to this strange new world." However, these interpretations of the title do not bear the same thematic weight as a third interpretation involving Pocahontas's child. Rolfe's final voiceover tells his son of his mother's last words, as he says, "She gently reminded me that all must die. 'tis enough,' she said, 'that you, our child, should live.'" The line indicates Pocahontas's love for her son, but also suggests her hope for what he represents. As Sinnerbrink asserts, her son with Rolfe is the "bearer of the fusion or hybrid becoming of worlds, a child of the future marking the possibility of a new beginning" (*New Philosophies of Film* 189). Sinnerbrink provides the most compelling argument regarding the film's title, especially in the way he analyses subtext that other texts leave unexplored. Pocahontas is aware of the Powhatan and the settlers' conflict, but perceives her child as representing a future where the two groups intermingle and live peacefully. Film critic Amy Taubin's review offers further nuance regarding the

film's characterisation of Pocahontas, articulating that her death is particularly "tragic because the viewer knows, with the advantage of historical hindsight, that her vision of the merging of two worlds died when she herself died" ("Birth of a Nation"). Malick never imbues *The New World* with an anachronistic sense of the future, trusting its audience to fill in the subsequent history. *The New World* presents various readings of its title, relying on the audience's knowledge of history to complete its ideological work.

The New World's conclusion transforms it into a meditation on disappointment and unfulfilled wishes. As has been previously established, the film consistently and earnestly inhabits its central characters' perspectives. However, that earnestness does not necessarily indicate an endorsement of those perspectives, especially with a director who has consistently interrogated his characters' fantasies, and *The New World's* characters idealise the world around them. Malick conveys this most clearly during Pocahontas's final meeting with Smith. He clearly regrets his previous decisions, saying, "I thought it was a dream, what we knew in the forest. It's the only truth." His words represent the regrets of a man who traded a myth of romantic love for a myth of discovery. Smith's consistent predisposition toward romantic fantasies indicates that this final realisation is not the "truth" so much as an attempt to regress into a faded fantasy. Pocahontas is presented similarly, with her declaration of oneness with Smith affirmed during their passionate affair, before it is undermined and complicated by subsequent events. Despite the respectful construction of her character, she is not immune to idealising the world around her, as with her naïve conception of her son's potential. Authors such as Ross have discussed the film in terms of its replication of regressive conventions, but Sinnerbrink maintains that *The New World* suggests "an aesthetic experience of encounter, a moment of being open to the New, while at the same time evoking the tragedy of history, the destruction of the moment of mutual encounter that was yet to come" (*New Philosophies of Film* 189). The difficulty with a director who creates such dense films is working out where

the self-conscious deconstruction of characters and narrative convention ends. *The New World's* final sequences make it relatively clear that although Pocahontas and Smith are no longer intertwined, they are still invested in their respective dreams. *The New World* dissects waking dreams, critiquing various romantic fantasies.

The New World's conclusion plays ironically on the spectator's knowledge of history. As Rolfe and his son board a ship bound for Virginia, there is a brief shot of a dilapidated cemetery (**Shot 3.38**), where Pocahontas is presumably buried. Although both Pocahontas and Rolfe indicate that she is at peace, the tombstone – a traditionally colonial signifier of death – presents the ultimate symbol of assimilation. Her death reflects the ongoing conflict between Powhatan and the settlers' increasing dominance. Siebert critiques the erasure of the absence of the Powhatan in the film's final sequences:

by offering its viewers the final image of American wilderness undisturbed by any human agency (except of the implied English new arrivals who enter the forest), *The New World* prompts them to ponder nostalgically what never was in the first place, except in the European imagination. (146)

Siebert is right to note the absence of non-colonial perspectives in the final sequences, but the shift is too abrupt to be anything but intentional. The sequence stands in stark contrast to the Powhatan's consistent presence to that point, but it is crucial that the sequence immediately follows Pocahontas's death. Her perspective has been erased from the movie, doubling as a reflection of the settlers' erasure of the Powhatan. The film's final sequence shows its perspective reverting to colonialism, thinking of Virginia's riches and erasing its original inhabitants. The film's conclusion does not romanticise colonialism and assimilation, as Siebert suggests, but considers them from the perspectives of those involved. It is internally cohesive, as there is no indication that Rolfe would question or critique the implications of his people's imperialist actions. Further, Malick's consistent association of the Powhatan

with Virginia's landscapes renders erasure impossible. Their eventual absence can only prompt the viewer's confusion, given their regular presence throughout the film's narrative. In this context, then, the emptiness of the land does not present Virginia as a land free for colonisation, but make the spectator consider the erasure and violence inherent to colonial ideals. Despite the erasure inherent to Pocahontas's death and the final absence of the Powhatan, *The New World*'s self-conscious embodiment of a colonial perspective reveals it to be a trenchant critique of colonialism, and an account – however mythologised – of the Native Americans who suffered from it.

Time and Trauma: The Reconfiguration of Coming of Age in *The Tree of Life*

There are a number of conflicting rumours regarding Terrence Malick's life during his hiatus between *Days of Heaven* and *The Thin Red Line*, but probably the most notorious project that he dabbled in during this period is *Q*, an unfinished film that Malick eventually returned to in some capacity with *The Tree of Life*. Film critic David Uhlich's review provides the context for *Q*, which reportedly focused on "no less than life, the universe and everything, with particular emphasis – la [sic] Kubrick's *2001* – on the origins of Earth" ("The Tree of Life"). Specific details regarding *Q* are sparse, but Uhlich's description establishes common thematic concerns with Malick's 2011 film. *The Tree of Life*'s narrative is primarily concerned with the O'Brien family, who are the focal point of the film's human considerations. It is primarily a coming-of-age story, showing the family's oldest son, Jack (Hunter McCracken), struggling to come to terms with his identity and relationship to his mother (Jessica Chastain) and father (Brad Pitt). As with *The Thin Red Line*, *The Tree of Life* is difficult to summarise, not because it has a large ensemble of characters, but because it pushes Malick's experimental style further than it had previously been taken. Cause and effect is largely absent from its narrative, which is principally presented as an adult Jack's (Sean Penn) memories of growing up in 1950s Waco, Texas.²⁴ Jack's adult self is disconnected and unhappy, a condition which is traced back to his brother R.L.'s (Laramie Eppler) early death.²⁵ Malick explores religious faith and doubt in the face of tragedy, with both Jack and his mother demonstrably shaken by R.L.'s death. Theologian Luke Timothy Johnson articulates the narrative's autobiographical aspects, as Malick "grew up in Texas and had a brother who died at nineteen" (Kilby, Johnson, and Prusak 13). It is impossible to know how many of the film's details are autobiographical, but it would not seem to be a stretch to

²⁴ Jack's adult self is not explicitly located within the present day, but clearly exists much later than the 1950s.

²⁵ The cause of death is never made explicit, but various authors have assumed that R.L. died in combat during the Vietnam War. Regardless, R.L.'s death itself is less significant within the narrative than its impact on his family.

call *The Tree of Life* Malick's most personal work. Despite – or perhaps because of – this intimacy, the film also considers the state of the universe and the meaning of human life, presenting an extended sequence showing the planet's formation – which famously features dinosaurs – and its early days. *The Tree of Life*'s operatic scope juxtaposes the personal and the universal.

The Tree of Life's reception is in line with Malick's other films in its sharp division of critical and audience opinion. As with all of Malick's later films, *The Tree of Life* was intensely anticipated, partially because of repeated delays in release.²⁶ Robert Sinnerbrink notes that upon the film's 2011 Cannes premiere, reviews were divided between "rapturous celebration and sarcastic ridicule" ("Cinematic Belief" 103-4). Despite this, the film was awarded the Palme d'Or, the festival's highest honour. Philosophical theorist Gail Hamner's analysis recounts that the film "disgruntled enough viewers [...] that some theatres posted no-refund notices and warned customers that the film lacked linear storytelling" (1). The film was intensely polarising, frustrating critics and audiences alike with its unconventional narrative. Despite its potentially alienating qualities, it eventually emerged as the best-reviewed movie of the year.²⁷ Sinnerbrink asserts that the film's detractors criticised its "aesthetic as compromised by its spiritual-religious commitment" ("Cinematic Belief" 104). Illustrations of those detractors – from both religious and secular perspectives – will be seen later in the chapter. Malick's sincere depiction of a family's faith in crisis was rare within the modern landscape, especially given his film's celestial themes and mythopoeic scope. His films have all tackled spirituality and the state of human existence, but *The Tree of Life* takes the fraught relationship between humanity and an unseen higher power as its central subject. *The Tree of Life* captured and polarised critical and audience attention, receiving ridicule and

²⁶ The film had been sold to a number of international distributors by mid-2009, with an early cut submitted for Cannes Film Festival consideration in 2010, but Malick did not feel the film was ready.

²⁷ This assertion is deeply subjective, but supported by an aggregate list of critics' most-loved movies: <http://criticstop10.com/best-of-2011/>

harsh critiques - prompted mostly by its religious elements and unconventional construction – even as it became one of 2011's best-received films.

Coming-of-Age Genre

The coming-of-age film is defined by its focus on younger characters, its lack of obvious genre signifiers, and its emphasis on character over narrative. As a genre, it is simultaneously self-evident and elusive. Coming-of-age films typically focus on young characters – although even that is not a necessity, as recent films like *Moonrise Kingdom* (Anderson, 2012) depict adults coming of age alongside younger protagonists. In narrative terms, these films require an awakening within their central characters, but they otherwise lack obvious genre signifiers. A Western, for example, is easily identifiable through elements such as guns, horses, and shootouts. Not all Westerns feature these elements, but their prevalence has rendered them clear indicators of genre. The coming-of-age film is different, in that there are few iconic signifiers— other than adolescents – that are consistently seen within the genre. On thematic and narrative levels, these films usually track their protagonist's development from adolescence into early adulthood through a gradual awakening, but they are otherwise amorphous. In contrast to the Western's easily identifiable historical context, a coming-of-age film can be set in any period. One of the genre's most readily identifiable attributes is its focus on character over narrative, a quality consistent within Malick's oeuvre, which has often resisted linearity and conventional narrative construction. The intimate focus on one – or more – character's shifting consciousness means that the genre often tends towards naturalism. Again, this is by no means a rule, but an observational narrative and slower pace is thematically appropriate for a genre which takes maturation as its central tenet. Coming-of-age films are difficult to define because of their lack of clear signifiers other than a focus on the central character's maturation.

The Tree of Life is consistent with Malick's oeuvre in its initial evocation and subsequent interrogation of genre conventions. Although the coming-of-age film has been established as having fewer genre-specific signifiers, it features familiar archetypes. Genre theorists Murray Pomerance and Frances Gateward's study of the genre asserts its typical protagonist as male, before describing his archetypal characteristics:

brash and dirty, covered with oil or grease or burrs or straw, freckled and wide-eyed, innocent in a way the most innocent girl can never be, fond of the outdoors or at least comfortable there [and...] curious about the animal world and empowered to relate easily with it and therefore, somehow animal himself. (2)

In other words, typical representations of young males in the coming-of-age genre conform to gendered stereotypes of boys as wild, unruly and unreflecting. Malick nuances the genre's conception of gender by locating Jack as the focal point of both stereotypically masculine aggression and feminine reflection, qualities which are passed on to him by his parents. The film's iconography associates Jack with traditionally masculine symbols, such as guns (**Shot 4.1**). However, Jack's voiceover narration strikes a wholly unexpected tenor in his awareness of his identity and limitations, as in statements like, "What I want to do, I can't do. I do what I hate." The binary between the voice and the body recalls *Badlands* with its disconnection between Kit's masculine actions and Holly's feminine storytelling. Jack's actions are often associated with masculine aggression, but as in Malick's other films, these tendencies are never affirmed, instead presented as the behaviour of a boy struggling with his instincts. *The Tree of Life* evokes the coming-of-age genre's gendered construction of boyhood, but it also complicates and critiques masculine impulses.

Any discussion of *The Tree of Life*'s resistance to conventional narratives should examine its thematic through-lines, which enrich its meditation on childhood. The film's seemingly free-form vignettes are shaped by its thematic considerations of human nature, as

is consistent with Malick's other films. Towards the film's beginning, Mrs. O'Brien articulates one of its central ideas, the constant clash between "the way of nature" and "the way of grace". Speaking of what she learned from nuns in her childhood, Mrs. O'Brien says, "Grace doesn't try to please itself. Accepts being slighted, forgotten, disliked. Accepts insults and injuries." In direct contrast, "Nature only wants to please itself. Gets others to please it too. Likes to lord it over them. To have its own way. It finds reasons to be unhappy when all the world is shining around it."²⁸ It should be specified that "nature" here refers to human nature, as opposed to the natural world. Superficially, nature is represented by Jack's father, while his mother is associated with grace. One of the binary's most striking features is its similarity to the defining opposition between characters Witt and Welsh, specifically their different perspectives toward the natural world's essential sublimity or cruelty, respectively, in *The Thin Red Line*. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien cannot be correlated directly with these two approaches due to their differing narrative contexts, but the juxtaposition between the accepting, serene grace and the bullish, stubborn nature is striking in its invocation of Malick's earlier film. As with each of Malick's other films, *The Tree of Life* presents characters that embody various ways of living before pitting them directly against each other. Their opposing natures create conflict, but through the lens of the coming-of-age film, the ways of nature and grace are most important in their presence within Jack, as his personal development is measured through the ways he comes to reflect his parents' disparate attitudes. Towards the film's conclusion, Jack whispers in voiceover, "Mother. Father. Always you wrestle inside me. Always you will." On a personal level, the film explores the way our parents' identities shape our own, but on a broader level, Jack's parents represent

²⁸ The dialogue recalls *The Thin Red Line*'s final lines, with Private Train saying, "Oh, my soul. Let me be in you now. Look out through my eyes. Look out at the things you made. All things shining." His narration foreshadows *The Tree of Life*'s study of faith. Train is a peripheral character within the narrative, but his words indicate a possible shift toward a spiritual conception of life in the aftermath of combat.

opposed ways of living. Malick's film is simultaneously intimate and abstracted, with its coming-of-age story articulated through the differing attitudes of grace and nature.

The Tree of Life embodies childhood in its non-linear depiction of the events which formed Jack's adult identity. The film – like Malick's 1970s films - depicts the interrelations between a small cast of central characters, but it depicts family drama instead of romantic entanglements. Its presentation of childhood events and emotions is unexpected, particularly with recognisable stars like Brad Pitt and Sean Penn receiving top billing. The focus on the everyday lives of suburban American children over the adult characters played by recognisable stars risks leaving the film feeling slight and inconsequential, even with the contextualising factors of Malick's interrogation of faith and the universe. However, Malick prevents this by embodying a childlike perspective, presenting his characters' lives without condescension. Otherwise insignificant events are invested with gravity through Malick's use of music, with a soundtrack that employs pre-existing classical tracks along with Alexandre Desplat's original score. When Jack steals a slip from a neighbour's house and guiltily lets it wash away in a river current, the scene is underscored by Giya Kancheli's "Morning Prayers," a low-pitched, foreboding piece. Karen Kilby rightly notes the relative insignificance of the event, as "no great damage is done, but the film's score lends to the incident the seriousness Augustine's Confessions gives to the theft of pears from a neighbour's garden" (Kilby, Johnson and Prusak 10). The music reflects Jack's inner turmoil, introducing the onset of erotic feeling and his consequent guilt. Malick's use of music brings a greater sense of importance to narrative events, allowing the spectator to invest in them as significant in the formation of Jack's identity. *The Tree of Life* embodies Jack's rapidly-shifting perspective, constructing his viewpoint without condescension.

Impressionism

Impressionism is a French film movement that spanned the late 1910s to the late 1920s which privileged the representation of individual subjectivities, an element that represents a connection to *The Tree of Life*. Its films and critical theory attempted to delineate cinema from other art forms in a time period when the medium was not widely respected.²⁹ Bordwell's history of the movement defines it in terms of "extensive use of 'subjective' optical devices and rhythmic editing. Impressionist film theory considers '*photogénie*' or self-conscious pictorialism as the essence of cinema" (*French Impressionist Cinema* 8). Impressionism created a compromise between commercial and avant-garde modes of cinema. Its films had cohesive narratives and characters, like mainstream film, but their style pushed traditional boundaries of cinematic expression. Malick's oeuvre functions similarly, with a consistent tendency to tell simple or familiar stories through challenging stylistic means. Bordwell further describes *photogénie* as "the transforming, revelatory power of cinema: transforming because *photogénie* surpasses sheer literal reproduction of reality; revelatory because it presents a fresh perspective upon reality" (*French Impressionist Cinema* 108). *Photogénie* describes the medium's ability to transcend reality, and capture a subjective point of view. Bordwell further details the importance of *photogénie* within Impressionism:

[The movement] must also distinguish *photogénie* from reality in its raw state, for *photogénie* could hardly transform reality without some margin of difference. The Impressionists claim that this difference lies in film technique, which not only records material reality but also expresses the film-makers' subjective, personal attitude. (*French Impressionist Cinema* 113-114)

²⁹ The movement is too broad to encompass entirely here, but key figures include Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, and Louis Delluc, all of whom produced both films and film theory. Key films include *The Woman From Nowhere* (Delluc 1922), *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (Dulac 1923), and *The Three-Sided Mirror* (Epstein 1927).

The following discussion will assert a stylistic association between *The Tree of Life* and French Impressionism, despite the movement's location within discrete historical and national boundaries.

The Tree of Life recalls Impressionist traditions in its presentation of a subjective perspective. The film is framed by the device of Jack's adult recollection of his childhood, suggesting a subjectivity appropriate for a matter as inherently nostalgic as one's own past. Despite the vastness of the film's time frame – particularly considering the creation sequence – Sinnerbrink is right to assert that the narrative unfolds over the course of “one day, a spiritual moment of vision [...] in which all is transfigured, [which] reverberates throughout Jack's life” (“Cinematic Belief” 107). The film's non-linear structure begins with Mrs. O'Brien discussing her childhood over images of a girl, presumably her younger self, before she and her husband learn of her son's death in the 1960s. R.L.'s death throws the family into turmoil, which is seen in the detachment and disillusionment of Jack's later life. Subsequently, the film moves into the creation sequence, during which it shifts through an incalculable number of years before it eventually settles in 1950s Waco, where the bulk of the narrative takes place. Although there is subsequently at least a semblance of linearity, the film maintains its free-flowing form, presenting itself as a series of moments that Jack recalls from his childhood. Beyond the impossibility of ordering the film's childhood scenes, Malick intermittently cuts back to Jack's adult self, reminding spectators that they are not seeing an unmediated narrative, but an individual's memory. Malick's films have always reflected their characters' mental states – as demonstrated by *Badlands*' affected, ambivalent tone, *The Thin Red Line*'s embodiment of the natural world's horror and sublimity, and *The New World*'s blinkered romance – but *The Tree of Life* presents the most explicit evocation of individual perspectives. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien's voiceovers violate the flashback structure of Jack's narrative, but they are justified by the film's consideration of the way their perspectives have

crafted their son's. In this context, these three characters can be viewed as three separate iterations of a single soul, a concept which is familiar from *The Thin Red Line*. *The Tree of Life*'s non-linear narrative is justified by its diegetic location within one character's reflections on their life.

The Tree of Life is organised despite its non-linearity, as its editing creates visual and thematic associations without becoming beholden to conventional narrative structures. At one point, Mrs. O'Brien is shown trick-or-treating with her children on Halloween, with Jack wearing a rabbit mask (**Shot 4.2**). This impression quickly gives way to Mrs. O'Brien reading a story about rabbits to her children (**Shot 4.3**), which itself cuts to an image of a rabbit fleeing the garden (**Shot 4.4**). It is impossible to locate these images chronologically, but linearity is rendered irrelevant by the evocation of memory. Malick's emphasis on Jack's memories and sensory impressions recalls film theorist and Impressionist director Germaine Dulac, who asserted that the "real goal of cinema [is] to visualise the events or the joys of the inner life" (312). Within the film's non-linear narrative, discrete events are less significant than their place within the film's movements, privileging tone and feeling over narrative. Maureen Turim's account of the function and style of cinematic flashbacks examines their development after the Second World War, at which point cinematic narratives began to employ "fragmentation representing memory as fleeting, highly selective images governed by an individual's subjective experience" (206). Turim notes a shift from a kind of objective recollection to the subjective evocation of memory which Malick's film employs in its fast-flowing, fragmentary construction. *The Tree of Life*'s editing rhythms evoke human memory by emphasising visual connections over chronology, recalling both Impressionist techniques and post-war flashback construction.

Malick blurs the line between objective presentation and subjective perspectives, foregrounding the film's construction. He presents an ambiguous synthesis of memory and

narrative without specifying the storyteller's location within the diegesis. When R.L. asks his mother to "tell us a story from before we can remember," she briefly reminisces about the time she went on a plane. As the story begins, the film cuts to a point-of-view shot from a plane's passenger (**Shot 4.5**), visually representing Mrs. O'Brien's story. However, it is uncertain whether the image directly presents her memories or Jack's perception of the story, particularly as the shot immediately preceding it foregrounds Jack's gaze (**Shot 4.6**). Dulac indicates the close-up's significance within Impressionist style, where it was presented as "the very thought of the character projected onto the screen. It is his soul, his desire" (310). Malick's close-ups directly recall Impressionist techniques, consistently associating the narrative and its images with Jack's gaze. That evocation of the gaze is consistent within Malick's oeuvre, but the most pertinent example here is *Badlands*' final shots (**Shots 1.13-1.14**), which represent an early iteration of this dynamic with strikingly similar iconography, given the images of flight. *The Tree of Life* utilises the coming-of-age genre in an intensely subjective manner, blurring the lines between various characters' perspectives.

The Tree of Life's style recalls Impressionist films, which blur the boundary between subjective and objective modes of representation. *The Smiling Madame Beudet* (Dulac 1922) is an Impressionist film whose narrative concerns a woman living with her boorish husband. Dulac foregrounds Madame Beudet's gaze (**Shot 4.7**) and visualises her subconscious (**Shot 4.8**), demonstrating her subjective perspective. Malick's repackaging of Impressionist strategies can be seen in the way his treatment of the plane sequence (**Shots 4.5-4.6**) recalls the close-up and illustration of Madame Beudet's fantasies. Dulac's film demonstrates the Impressionist movement's eschewal of reality, depicting Madame Beudet's reality and her thoughts, sometimes simultaneously through superimposition (**Shot 4.9**). The latter technique is most noteworthy in its depiction of the interaction between objective and subjective states. Malick does not employ superimposition in his evocation of Jack's subjectivity, but he does

present different levels of perception. For example, Malick includes Jack's voiceover during the aforementioned point-of-view shot (**Shot 4.5**) as he whispers, "Mother. Make me good. Brave." Even while the spectator is located within a memory that could be attributed to Mrs. O'Brien, it is connected to Jack. The plane memory – or fantasy – is followed by images of Mrs. O'Brien floating in mid-air (**Shot 4.10**), an ethereal, graceful figure. If there was any doubt whose perspective the point-of-view shots are from, there is none here; they explicitly depict Jack's romanticised perception of his mother, reminding the spectator that the narrative exists within his memories. The film does not foreground the complexity of its construction, but the sequence has multi-layered connotations, with an adult Jack recalling not only his memories, but also his childhood fantasies, creating an even greater ambiguity regarding the reliability of his memories. Malick's expression of subjectivity differs in his reliance on the film's memory-based narrative and free-form editing instead of techniques like superimposition, but his film recalls Impressionism in his experimental construction of individual perspective.

Malick uses Impressionist strategies to draw on film history, evoking Jack's perspective while simultaneously counterposing Impressionism's avant-garde style against popular culture's iconography. While considering the possibility of his mother dying, Jack sees her laid out in a tableau (**Shot 4.11**) reminiscent of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937 Hand, et al.), suggesting a limited understanding of death and a tendency to process concepts through mediated images. Philosophical scholar Moritz Pfeifer's discussion of the film's reflexivity asserts that "the Disney reference, being part of Jack's imagination, will reveal something about the boy's ambiguous relation to his mother; on a more general scale, it shows how pop culture influences children's phantasies" ("Either and Or"). Pfeifer also draws more esoteric associations between Malick's film and directors like Andrei Tarkovsky, but the evocation of Disney's imagery is more relevant here in the way it relates to

Impressionism. Malick differs from Impressionism in that he has decades of cinematic history to draw upon, whereas Impressionism was an early attempt to differentiate cinema from other art forms. The image of Jack's mother in the coffin employs Impressionist strategies in its suggestion of Jack's personal understanding of death, but it differs in its invocation of filmic history. In this context, the binary between the movement's avant-garde style and its more conventional narrative content is heightened even further, with Malick presenting a ubiquitous Western cultural referent that nonetheless enlightens us about his central characters' perspective. Turim notes that complex flashback structures often "emphasise the means by which film presents its fiction. The imaginary entrance into a present reality is provided, but the spectator is made aware of the threshold and the process of transversing it" (16). *The Tree of Life*'s flashback structure highlights its construction, with the reference to Snow White forcing an acknowledgment of external texts at the same time as developing our understanding of Jack. There is also a kind of reflexivity in his use of Impressionism: the film movement as it was originally conceived also highlighted subjectivity, but Malick's synthesis of the movement with broadly conventional elements represents a revision of filmic style and content. Reflexivity is also present in the way the film creates reflections within Malick's oeuvre, as in the aforementioned analysis of *Badlands*' and *The Tree of Life*'s plane-bound sequences. Malick's film furthers its subjectivity through intertextual references, highlighting the revision of its key components.

Evoking Collective Perspectives

Although *The Tree of Life* is Jack's coming-of-age narrative, the film frequently showcases peripheral perspectives. In many ways, Jack is a passive figure within his own story, with the film depicting external forces acting upon and shaping him. Jack's passivity reinforces the film's themes about our helplessness in the universe, with his relationship to the adults around him reflecting human relationships to a higher power. His parents are the

primary example of this dynamic, with Jack observing and re-enacting their behaviour, explicitly shown when Jack imitates his father's gruff, authoritarian manner of speech. The film regularly foregrounds his silent gaze, as when he watches his mother tell her flight story (**Shot 4.6**), suggesting the internalisation and construction of his own perspective. Despite that subjective evocation, the film demonstrates a universality of human experience. The foremost example of this comes when another child drowns in a public swimming pool, with the child's mother crouching helplessly by his side (**Shot 4.12**). This scene, apart from driving Jack's questions about God's existence and cruelty, echoes the early scene when Mrs. O'Brien is told of her son's death.³⁰ As Hamner suggests, "the apparently private experience of the O'Briens is connected through montage to the persons and creatures around them, and to the cosmic and terrestrial histories that precede them" (10). That connection is even more explicitly evoked in *The Thin Red Line*, but *The Tree of Life* nevertheless depicts people as inextricable from each other and the world around them. Jack's encounters with others – whether they are fleeting encounters or lasting relationships – are significant both in themselves, and their reflection of various aspects of the O'Briens' lives. Early in the film, one of Jack's co-workers is shown saying "She wants to get back together, but that chapter's closed, story's been told." That co-worker never reappears, which could make his appearance jarring. However, it is one of several instances of outside perspectives momentarily presenting themselves to the viewer. The moment gives the viewer a transient glimpse into the character's professional life while also prompting reflection on the other relationships that have been showcased at this point, specifically Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, and Jack's relationship to his own wife. It is hard to imagine such a moment existing in a less compassionate and sprawling film, but these thematic and narrative echoes create a kind of unity within Malick's

³⁰ Several perceptive authors – including David Sterritt – have claimed that it is Jack's brother who drowns in the swimming pool. The ease of that misreading – which is aided by the similarities in appearance between Mrs. O'Brien and the other child's mother – only emphasises the visual echoes within the film's narrative, and recalls the conflation of identity seen in *The Thin Red Line*.

filmic universe, even if the connection is forged by mutual suffering in an indifferent world.

The Tree of Life generates a sense of universal connection, symbolically connecting the O'Briens to the human race.

The creation sequence serves a similar purpose to the external perspectives in its articulation of the O'Briens' place within the universe. Remarkably, it does so without diminishing its central narrative's significance or condescending to its characters. Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) provides a useful point of comparison with Malick's film because of the two works' philosophical consideration of humanity's place in the world.³¹ The films provide opposed visions, with Kubrick projecting a distant future, while Malick returns to the origin of life. The sequence is remarkable in the way it lends cosmic weight to what would otherwise fit within the genre trappings of the coming-of-age story and the family melodrama, forcing us to consider the narrative's full scope in the context of the universe. The creation sequence asserts the O'Briens' relative insignificance in the overall universe, but it also renders them integral within it; the family does not loom large in the course of history, but it is impossible to extricate them from their relationship with the universe, or their reflective relationship with Christian theology. The creation sequence places the O'Briens within context in the universe, but it never dismisses or diminishes them, instead articulating their – and by extension, humanity's – significance.

The dinosaurs are also depicted in terms of nature and grace, furthering Malick's conception of all life as precious. One of the film's key sequences is a quasi-confrontation between two dinosaurs. It starts with one of them – clearly a predator – running toward the second dinosaur, which is lying vulnerable on the ground (**Shot 4.13**). Malick's framing specifically indicates menace, with the dinosaur running rapidly toward the camera. The first

³¹ The two films even share a key crew member: Douglas Trumbull, co-creator of *2001: A Space Odyssey*'s visual effects, also served as Malick's visual effects consultant for *The Tree of Life*.

dinosaur slams its foot down on the second's head, clearly ready to end its life (**Shot 4.14**). However, something changes its mind at the last second, and it instead retreats, leaving the second dinosaur still vulnerable, but unharmed (**Shot 4.15**). The latter shot meaningfully echoes the first, with the camera's position changed very slightly, the sky more prominent and centrally framed. In one scene, while Mrs. O'Brien plays with her children, she spins one of them around before pointing at the sky and exclaiming, "That's where God lives!" The sky is associated with the way of grace, with the cinematography indicating that the dinosaur's actions conform to that ideology. Additionally, the dinosaur's movement toward the skyline, instead of toward the other dinosaur, furthers this association. The sequence could be read as anthropocentric, representing another species through the lens of human beliefs, but Malick's location of the ways of grace and nature as beyond humanity renders the ideologies as an inherent part of our world. The dinosaurs' connection with the ways of nature and grace reflect the O'Briens' narrative, but they are also significant in their own right. Soon after this sequence, a meteor is shown hitting the earth (**Shot 4.16**), wiping out the dinosaurs.

Philosophical scholar Bertha Alvarez Manninen astutely states "how small of an event it really was from a cosmic perspective, and yet, as the following scene illustrates, it destroyed all life and turned Earth into a barren ice-encrusted wasteland" (7). The creation sequence makes us aware of the O'Briens' relative insignificance, while the meteor demonstrates the same about the dinosaurs, even as it conveys the tragedy of their deaths. Malick's representation of the dinosaurs continues his respect for all life, connecting them to his human characters in their paralleled fates and capacity for grace.

Grace and Nature

Although the O'Brien parents are figured oppositionally, the film conveys their perspectives equally, alongside their corresponding positive and negative features. The O'Briens clearly embody – at least superficially – the ways of nature and grace that Mrs.

O'Brien outlines at the film's beginning. Mr. O'Brien is a stern authoritarian who is consistently unsatisfied with his place in life, and questions other people's success. After a church service, he states, "Wrong people go hungry, die. Wrong people get loved. The world lives by trickery. If you want to succeed, you can't be too good." Mr. O'Brien presumes godlike judgment, loftily deciding who deserves to live and be loved. Mrs. O'Brien is patient and gentle, providing a stark contrast to her husband. Despite this, Mr. O'Brien is not demonised. As film scholar David Sterritt claims, an explosive dinnertime conflict "is less the stuff of Dickensian nightmare than a portrait of a well-intentioned but all-too-human man who falls short of his own standards in any number of departments" ("Days of Heaven and Waco" 56). Mr. O'Brien is severe, but as the film demonstrates, the world can be intensely painful for sensitive people. The centrality of grief and suffering to the narrative contextualises his attempts to train his sons into his brand of masculinity. Similarly, Mrs. O'Brien is ethereally idealised through Jack's perspective, but her husband's charge of naïveté is difficult to deny following her inability to deal with Jack's rebellious behaviour. Cinematography embodies their contrasting perspectives, particularly when the O'Briens learn of their son's death. A letter is delivered to Mrs. O'Brien at home, at which point the film's free-floating aesthetic is interrupted by several jump cuts, articulating the rupture in Mrs. O'Brien's life. As she stands, the camera drifts away and abruptly pans downward, obscuring the spectator's sight of her (**Shot 4.17**) before cutting away as she cries out, as if it is too painful a moment to intrude on. Mr. O'Brien receives the news through a phone call at work. The moment is treated completely differently, with the camera trained intently on his face (**Shot 4.18**) for around fifteen seconds as he processes his son's death. The only sound discernible in this sequence is a plane's engine concealing Mr. O'Brien's verbal response. Both parents are clearly grief-stricken, but the presentation of these moments foregrounds Mr. O'Brien's masculine construction of self, with his relative composure juxtaposed against

his wife's breakdown. The sound design complicates the moment, suggesting that he is externally silenced by societal factors. Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien's opposed perspectives are represented and understood equally.

The voiceover narration attributed to Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien elucidates their worldviews and demonstrates the way they "fight within" Jack. Jack's perspective is central to the film, but Malick extends similar considerations to his parents, showing their relationship before Jack's birth. Their worldviews are also reflected through voiceover narration. Mrs. O'Brien's narration questions the existence of a higher power in a world which contains such suffering, but her narration – as well as much of Jack's – is still addressed directly to God, as when she, grieving the loss of her son, asks, "Where were you? Did you know?" In contrast, Mr. O'Brien is often heard in voiceover, but the consistent tendency to reveal the diegetic source of his voiceover demonstrates his personal detachment from any higher power. Midway through the film, Malick presents Mr. O'Brien's worldview. He says, "You make yourself what you are. You have control of your own destiny. You can't say 'I can't'. You say 'I'm having trouble. I'm not done yet.' You can't say 'I can't.'" Before he finishes speaking, Malick cuts to the diegetic source of the words. Mr. O'Brien's claims to control his own destiny indicate the self-importance of his masculine perspective. Nature and grace are figured as aurally opposed in a manner that further delineates the differences between them, stylistically demonstrating the film's themes.

Jack becomes associated with the way of nature in his father's absence, suggesting a need for balance between the two ideologies. His relationship with Mr. O'Brien becomes particularly contentious as he discovers his own masculine identity and challenges his father. As Sterritt asserts, "Jack is at his happiest when the patriarch goes away on a business trip, [...] sparking the film's most idyllic family sequences" ("Days of Heaven and Waco" 53). While Sterritt is correct that the sequences immediately following Mr. O'Brien's departure

are joyous, Jack's eventual shift toward the way of nature also takes place during his father's absence, implying that it is not necessarily the direct influence of his parents which shapes this identity, but a need for balance. When Mrs. O'Brien attempts to scold him, Jack says, "I'm gonna do what I want. What do you know? You let him run all over you." His words reject his father's treatment of his mother while simultaneously re-enacting it in his aggression. Sinnerbrink's analysis of the ways of nature and grace compellingly argues that "Grace and Nature coexist, struggling and vying with each other, Grace having need of Nature, and Nature being imbued with Grace" ("Cinematic Belief" 107). Although Malick's characters are superficially identified with broad archetypes, their lapses and complexities are also showcased. Grace is depicted as something to strive towards, but it is also bound to nature. The film also complicates its central binary by implicitly suggesting a connection between God and the way of nature. When Jack asks "Why should I be good if you're not?" in voiceover narration, the question's ambiguity "serves to blur the line between God the Father and Mr. O'Brien the father," as Malick scholar Danny Fisher suggests (5). The ambiguity is tied to Mr. O'Brien's perception of himself as the ruler of his own universe, considering himself a god in his own right. Jack's perception of nature as a patriarchal authority is shown when he directs his voiceover narration toward God, saying "I wanna see what you see." His presumptuous aspirations distance him from the way of grace until he resembles his father – and God – in his embodiment of patriarchal authority. *The Tree of Life* suggests an inextricable connection between grace and nature even while it associates nature with patriarchal ideas of higher powers.

The O'Briens' ongoing struggles reveal that the way of grace does not guarantee God's protection, and the way of nature cannot insulate anyone from suffering. The film is not only a coming-of-age for Jack, but also his parents, who both reconcile themselves to life's hardships. The film's ultimate truth – beyond anything about the existence of a higher

power, or the construction of identity – is that loss and suffering are inevitable. *The Tree of Life* examines human responses to hardship, and the way that reflects on their character.

Hamner encapsulates the film's examination of loss in her assertion that "God's justice is not under scrutiny, but rather humanity's response – to God's gift of life, to humanity's inability to control this gift of life, and (therefore) to the inevitability of human suffering" (4). The other child drowning at the pool brings this into sharp contrast, introducing perspectives outside the O'Briens, and also emphasising the suffering that they face. Our focus remains largely with one family, but it is easy to extrapolate their grief onto the people around them. The O'Briens' crises indicate their personalities and ways of living. Mrs. O'Brien is grief-stricken by her son's death, leading to a crisis of faith, as she questions the existence and motivations of a benevolent God who could let her son die. Mr. O'Brien is clearly impacted by his son's death too, but that aspect of the film is largely navigated by his wife, as he deals with the external world. He places immense value on financial success, as shown when he complains about those better-off than he, with his crisis coming when the plant he is working at closes down. He is humbled to the point that he says, "I wanted to be loved because I was great, a big man. I'm nothing. Look at the glory around us; trees, birds. I lived in shame. I dishonoured it all, and didn't notice the glory. I'm a foolish man." His acceptance of his circumstances indicates an association – possibly temporary – with the way of grace.³² These separate crises are the final demonstration of the difference between nature and grace, with the O'Briens having their respective faiths shaken by external forces. *The Tree of Life* articulates a fundamental disconnection between Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien, but unites them through their inevitable suffering in a cruel world.

³² The word "glory" is used by a number of characters within *The Thin Red Line* especially, indicating its significance to Malick. These include Tall's assertion that "One man looks at a dying bird and thinks there's nothing but unanswered pain. That death's got the final word. It's laughing at him. Another man sees that same bird, feels the glory" and Witt's plaintive "What's keepin' us from reaching out, touching the glory?"

Problematising Historical Nostalgia

The Tree of Life's 1950s setting is crucial to its representation of nature and grace, with the film both establishing and undermining traditional gender roles. Malick uses the traditional archetypes of the 1950s – such as the breadwinning, authoritative husband and the passive, unemployed wife – to broadly sketch concepts of nature and grace. These ideologies parallel gender roles, with the husband aspiring to financial gain while the wife tends to the home. The film never endorses this reductive conception of gender, which becomes evident in Malick's complication of gender binaries. Fisher notes the complexity of Mr. O'Brien's characterisation in his claim that although the man is “meant to be both an archetypal Eisenhower-era father and the embodiment of nature, he also belongs to the memorable gallery of complicated, all-too-human characters Malick and his collaborators have created” (4). There are numerous occasions when Mr. O'Brien's heretofore repressed emotions surface. When he learns of his son's death (**Shot 4.18**), the grief in his eyes is one of his most obvious displays of emotion in the film. Mr. O'Brien is not an uncomplicated avatar of a way of life, but a man pushed into a role by societal expectations. The separation of his life and desires is most obvious in the contrast between his masculine occupation and his desire to play music, a much more personal expression of self. Even then, he is not depicted as privately conforming to the way of grace, as his interest in music is also associated with the medium's discipline, which conforms to his established personality. His closest analogue within Malick's oeuvre is Lieutenant Colonel Tall, whose voiceover explicitly articulates the way internalised societal expectations can shape identities. In a broader sense, Mr. O'Brien fits within Malick's tendency to problematise and critique male perspectives, which began with Kit in *Badlands*. With Mr. O'Brien, Malick juggles the tasks of critiquing the traditional 1950s male, suggesting the artificiality of that archetype, and creating a complex, believable character who cannot explicitly express that complexity.

Malick's representation of masculinity is nuanced by his representation of brotherhood, both within individual characters and the contrasts between them. R.L. is associated with the way of grace through music in the same way that his father is, and the two of them bond over their shared interest. Jack's frustration with his own limitations is shown to drive his inclination towards the way of nature. One of the film's most poignant vignettes shows R.L. and Mr. O'Brien playing music together (**Shot 4.19**) before revealing Jack jealously from a distance (**Shot 4.20**). He is subsequently viewed through panes of glass (**Shot 4.21**), visually articulating the separation between him and his father through the film's physical space. The spectator never becomes privy to R.L.'s inner life, but the brothers' seeming contradictions are juxtaposed against each other. Despite being an angry child lashing out at others' creativity, Jack goes on to become an architect, which itself could be read as a synthesis of nature and grace, with the occupation's creativity contrasted against the somewhat sterile cityscapes – whose construction he might have even contributed to – seen in Jack's later life. In contrast, R.L. is depicted as artistic and fundamentally peaceful, which belies his early death. It would be wrong to unequivocally assume that he died in war, given the scarcity of details, but his youth indicates an unpleasant and unexpected death. Shots of R.L.'s room following his death shown at the beginning of the film (**Shot 4.22**) introduce the creativity that will be showcased later, reinforcing the tragedy of his death and providing an ironic counterpoint, given his fate. The vast gulf between Jack and R.L.'s personalities and eventual fates is emblematic of Malick's refusal to hew too closely to any binary construction.

Malick's representation of Mrs. O'Brien suggests the unspoken difficulties for women in the 1950s. For the most part, she fits the stereotypical role of a 1950s housewife; she is a young middle-class white woman whose respect for spiritual values is reflected in her everyday domestic actions; she is demure and polite, seemingly content to stay at home and

tend to her children. However, her role is complicated in similar ways to her husband's, with unspoken tensions conveyed through the performances. Johnson suggests that Mrs. O'Brien "is a blithe and gentle spirit who seems to desire nothing more than the life she shares with her husband and children" (Kilby, Johnson and Prusak 13). However, Johnson's reading of the character is not affirmed either by the narrative or the film's performances. Chastain's performance never conforms wholly to the way of grace, suggesting an inner life – and dissatisfaction with her place in life – that cannot be conveyed to the outside world. The way of grace is allegedly defined by its acceptance of circumstances, but Chastain regularly conveys doubt about her position. Late in the film, Malick presents an inaudible argument between Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien with no indication of its content. Mrs. O'Brien is subsequently shown watching her husband (**Shot 4.23**) while he plays the piano. The shot foregrounds Mrs. O'Brien's gaze in the same way that it has regularly foregrounded Jack's (**Shot 4.6**), encouraging the spectator to consider her perspective. Malick's use of chiaroscuro lighting indicates duality, suggesting depths that Mrs. O'Brien cannot express within her restricting maternal role. The association of traditional feminine roles with repression – both emotional and physical – is also shown in the location of a physical altercation between Mr. and Mrs. O'Brien in the kitchen, where she is performing menial chores (**Shot 4.24**).

Even beyond this suggestion of unseen depth, the film suggests the way of grace's drawbacks. At the beginning of the film, Mrs. O'Brien states that "the nuns taught us that no one who loves the way of grace ever comes to a bad end." Despite this, her personal relationships and her son's death bring her suffering. Johnson goes on to say that Mrs. O'Brien "personifies the film's definition of grace; even as she gives to others, so does she receive affliction" (Kilby, Johnson and Prusak 13). Although the ambiguity of Mrs. O'Brien's allegiance to the way of grace has been established, she is *The Tree of Life*'s closest representation to an embodiment of that way of life. Through her suffering, Malick

suggests that grace brings individuals closer to a hypothetical higher power without offering any guarantee of happiness; it is a selfless way of life, defiant in the face of hardship. Mrs. O'Brien's characterisation suggests the difficulties associated with both the way of grace and women in the 1950s.

The Tree of Life approaches history in a similar manner to gender in its invocation and deconstruction of traditional perceptions. The film presents an ostensibly archetypal American family: white, middle-class, and striving to improve their social standing. The same is true of the way the 1950s time period is constructed. As Hamner argues, Malick's film synthesises approaches to historical representation "by presenting the 'fixed forms' of the 1950s through toys and fashions, but also deploying a cinematography that does not allow reducing the past to these objects" (8). This complicated interaction with history comes from the spectator's knowledge of the film's location from within Jack's perspective. Malick's representation of history is encapsulated by the moment when the children run after a truck spraying DDT (**Shot 4.25**), with no music to dictate the spectator's response.³³ These moments create a kind of cognitive dissonance, forcing the viewer to reconcile their own knowledge with Jack's nostalgia for a bygone era. Historical subjectivity has been a constant point of reference within Malick's oeuvre, which constructs subjective narratives within historical settings. In discussing the flashback's potential for reflexivity, Maureen Turim describes the flashback's capacity for reflexivity:

Sometimes spectators maintain their distance and experience the narrative as a story that is being narrated, as a story from a past or from another scene to which they do not have an unmediated access. This distance may be encouraged by the film by internal distancing

³³ DDT is an insecticide used widely in America following the Second World War. Its agricultural use was banned after the discovery of its toxicity.

devices of several kinds, such as voice-over narration, stylised mise-en-scène, or the foregrounding of historical references. (16)

The narration's association with Jack's subjectivity has already been established, but Malick's period-specific use of mise-en-scène also evokes the 1950s through Jack's unreliable perspective, as in the idealised memory of the DDT truck.³⁴ The 1950s setting becomes just another thing that has been lost to Jack, reflecting his other losses. Spectators, however, watch from the present day, unable to immerse themselves in the period, inviting them to interrogate the images and narrative. Jack's perspective presents a romanticised version of his childhood and the 1950s generally, which the spectator is encouraged to question and critique.

The 1950s and the present day are delineated in visual imagery, representing Jack's inability to romanticise his present circumstances. Jack's present is clearly more financially stable than his childhood, indicated by his designer home (**Shot 4.26**). These scenes contain conflicting connotations, with the house simultaneously denoting capitalist success and a kind of sterile malaise through Jack and his wife's literal separation within the frame. The neutral colours and the camera's continued distance from the performers (**Shot 4.27**) — create a sense of alienation reflecting Jack's own apathy. Sinnerbrink defines his perception of the film's representation of period as such:

The second layer is the historical-spiritual story, the way the O'Brien family's story depicts [...] a 'Fall' narrative from the romanticised historical 'Eden' of the 1950s

Midwest to the spiritually destitute space of contemporary urban America, marked by

³⁴ For example, there is an irony at play within Malick's use of Pan Am; Mr. O'Brien flies with the company for business-related reasons, connecting it with affluence, contrasting against the present-day viewer's knowledge of the company's later bankruptcy. Our knowledge of that bankruptcy is also followed through in Mr. O'Brien's later financial losses.

the imposing, geometrically ordered glass and steel architecture of downtown Houston. (“Cinematic Belief” 105)

Sinnerbrink is correct to note the demarcation of visuals between the two periods, but it is important to specify that it is Jack who has romanticised the 1950s, with his later life’s “destitute space” denoting his adult perception of his life. Further, although there are clear differences within the period representation, the 1950s are not always presented nostalgically, particularly where Mr. O’Brien is concerned (**Shot 4.28**). The narrative context of the images is elided by Mr. O’Brien’s voiceover, but a man – presumably his lawyer – pats him on the shoulder and can be heard faintly saying “We’ll get them next time.” Visually, the off-centre composition coupled with Pitt’s performance convey the unease that Jack’s nostalgia masks, in another moment that blurs the boundaries of whose perspective the film is presenting. The film crafts a social commentary, but it is more about the impact of gendered construction of identity throughout Jack’s life. In aligning himself with his father and the way of nature, Jack superficially attains the success that his father aspired to, only to find himself spiritually dissatisfied. Hamner explores the film’s examination of capitalist – and masculine – success:

Jack may “have” more success than his father – a more stable career, a larger (emptier) house, a beautiful and successful wife – but the linear gain of all these social goods occurs on the surface of vast and shifting social currents that do not value heteronormative family structure of the excesses of consumption in quite the same way. (14)

The beliefs that Jack’s father instilled in him may have been socially acceptable in the 1950s, but they became untenable as decades passed, leaving Jack unmoored within history, a relic of the past. The 1950s setting makes even more sense within this context, betraying Jack’s nostalgic concern for a time when conceptions of gender and capitalism seemed simpler. The

division in depiction between time periods represents Jack's status as a man left adrift by shifting social values which no longer reflect his learned conception of masculinity.

The Tree of Life's structure denies neat resolution in its commitment to depicting life's complications. The conclusion to Jack's childhood coming-of-age narrative sees his father losing his job and the family moving into an unknown future. As previously mentioned, Mr. O'Brien is humbled by his experience, saying, "I dishonoured it all, and didn't notice the glory. I'm a foolish man." Although the loss of his job is bittersweet, it seems to cause a positive adjustment to his outlook. There is some indication of success in the family's future, as the scene where Mrs. O'Brien receives news of her son's death shows that the O'Briens have moved into a modernised home (**Shot 4.29**). Their home is at least somewhat evocative of Jack's later residence (**Shot 4.26**) with its abundance of windows, creating a synthesis between the home and the outside world. The conclusion of the coming-of-age story is somewhat ambivalent, then, with Mr. O'Brien's epiphany and the family's future financial success tempered by our knowledge of the crisis that R.L.'s death causes, one that is clearly still present in Jack's adult life. Even the permanence of Mr. O'Brien's epiphany is uncertain; the spectator's glimpse of the family after R.L.'s death indicates a potential regression from his earlier realisation. This regression can be seen in his dismissal of a woman – potentially a friend – offering his wife condolences, assertively stating, "Go on now. We're all right." The fluidity of the film's structure allows for a nominally satisfying conclusion to Jack's coming-of-age narrative which is simultaneously augmented by the consistent awareness of the upcoming emotional distress. There is an implication that Mr. O'Brien has achieved the financial success that he was striving for, but that success is futile in the face of human mortality. *The Tree of Life*'s structure superficially implies closure, but any consideration of its chronology complicates the narrative's conclusion.

The Spiritual as Personal

The Tree of Life's central crisis is the struggle of embodying the way of grace in the face of suffering. Although the film adopts Jack's perspective, it also dedicates substantial screen time to depicting Mrs. O'Brien's struggle in the wake of her son's death. Her opening narration explicitly associates her with the way of grace, but her narrative throughout the film is defined by a crisis of faith. A preacher tries to comfort Mrs. O'Brien by saying that her son is with God now, to which she replies, "He was always with God, wasn't he?" Mrs. O'Brien is figured as the film's most spiritual character, but her son's tragic death shakes her faith. As philosophical theorist Warwick Mules asserts, Malick uses Jack and Mrs. O'Brien to pose "a series of questions to its audience through character voice-overs that concern the meaning of human life made meaningless by the indifferent force of nature that strikes individuals and families with calamities and death" (149). The film is Jack and Mrs. O'Brien's lament, a cry for affirmation in a world that is unwilling or unable to return it. *The Tree of Life*'s characters struggle to find meaning in the face of adversity, demonstrating the crises of faith people face in difficult times.

The Tree of Life explores faith and spirituality without confirming the existence of any higher power. The film foregrounds its characters' faith more than any of Malick's previous films, but it resists depicting any literal interaction between its characters and the higher power they address. Religious content is mostly confined to the voiceovers which Jack and Mrs. O'Brien direct to a higher power. The film is not about the relationship between God and humanity, but humanity's relationship to God. The focus is not on proving the existence of a higher power, but faith's struggles in everyday life. In discussing the film's theology, Sterritt observes that "from the prayers at the beginning to the sermon in the middle and the vision of heaven at the end, Malick's film is wrapped in a religiosity that secular humanists will find nostalgic and naïve" ("Days of Heaven and Waco" 52). Sterritt's

argument seems to overlook the significance of faith to its central characters, especially in the context of Malick's embodiment of their perspectives. It is true that the characters' faith may seem misguided to an irreligious viewer, but the film itself never confirms God's existence, instead focusing on the O'Briens' prayers. Organised religion is also not glorified, as the O'Briens' eventual reconciliations derive from spiritual contemplation as opposed to association with any religious community. The film's religious content is curious and probing, speaking more to one family's relationship to religion than a unified theology. *The Tree of Life* focuses intimately on spirituality, but its concerns are defiantly human-sized, considering individual relationships with a silent higher power.

Although Malick never explicitly affirms religious beliefs, his reverential treatment of faith gives his film a spiritual tone. Theological scholar Christopher B. Barnett wrote that "In short, what distinguishes God is that he cannot be distinguished – picked out, isolated – from creaturely things" (9). If this conception is to be taken at face value, any attempt to literally depict God would be foolhardy, as his existence is beyond human comprehension. Malick is freed from any obligation to slavishly reproduce religious texts, allowing him to express spirituality and transcendence in his characters' everyday lives. Film critic Justin Chang's review of the year in film refers to *The Tree of Life* as "a sustained contemplation of the divine, while recognising that divinity is not just an entity that looms over us but something we experience daily, at a molecular level" ("2011: Life, the Universe..."). Chang's discussion of the film – although brief – perceptively addresses the film's depiction of spirituality from a resolutely human perspective. Malick never confirms God's existence, but the film's insistence on life's basic meaning – as seen in the mournful treatment of the dinosaurs' death – regardless creates a reverent tone. Moments like Jack's perception of Mrs. O'Brien's flight (**Shot 4.10**) generate enigmatic spiritual meaning not only for Jack, but also the spectator; the moment does not confirm God's existence, but it conveys Jack's spiritual

experience, demonstrating his conception of spirituality. It also ties the spiritual to the mundane in expressing a moment of transcendence while grounding it in Jack's perception of his mother. *The Tree of Life* never confirms the existence of any higher power, instead respectfully presenting Jack's spirituality.

Malick's refusal to confirm the existence of God echoes the "Book of Job," which is one of the words of the Hebrew Bible and also the first poetic book in the Christian Old Testament. The film's opening titles cite one of its verses, in which God responds to Job's anguished protestations with this series of rhetorical questions: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?... When the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4, 7). The "Book of Job" provides insight into the film's narrative. The Biblical text centres on Job's suffering; at the beginning of the Book, he is wealthy and has several children. The O'Briens attend a sermon midway through the film which discusses Job, addressing his belief that "the integrity of his behaviour would protect him against misfortune." God allows Satan to take Job's wealth and children, in a test to see if he would curse God's name. Job's friends advise him to repent based on their belief that his suffering is a punishment for sin, as God would not allow an innocent man to suffer. Job protests his innocence, questioning the justness of any God who would allow such suffering, and demands an answer from Him. As Manninen outlines, God eventually speaks from a whirlwind, but his "answer to Job's anguish is to recount the wonders of creation, consistently reminding Job that He was the one responsible for it all" (5-6). God's lack of justification for His actions leads Job to repent. *The Tree of Life* reconstructs Job's narrative, showing a human who believes herself innocent and who moves from questioning God's actions to accepting them. While grieving, Mrs. O'Brien asks, "Lord. Why? Where were you?" a question which is followed directly by the creation sequence. The sequence can be interpreted as a response to both Mrs. O'Brien and the spectator, similar to God's actions in

the “Book of Job.” Kilby articulates the association between *The Tree of Life* and the “Book of Job” in the way Malick “tries to see God’s answer to Job, rather than to explain it” (Kilby, Johnson, and Prusak 12). Malick’s inclusion of a citation from the “Book of Job” at the beginning of the film and the priest’s discussion of Job’s naiveté during his sermon further emphasises this association. Mr. O’Brien faces a similar crisis despite his disconnection from any higher power, in that he too is forced to realise that his striving does not guarantee him success. Like the “Book of Job,” *The Tree of Life* does not provide an explanation for the existence of suffering, but instead engages with obstacles to religious belief. Neither Malick’s film nor the original Biblical text offer explicit explanations to their central characters for their suffering, but they are consistent in their assertion that religious belief must be unselfish, undertaken not with expectation of reward, but for its own sake. *The Tree of Life* might be regarded as the spiritual descendant of the “Book of Job,” focusing on the limits of faith without justifying the world’s cruelty.

The Tree of Life’s final sequence offers an internal space of spiritual reconciliation, as opposed to a literal depiction of the afterlife. Johnson asserts that while “the depiction of cosmology is powerful and clear, the eschatological vision is oddly weak and vague” (Kilby, Johnson, and Prusak 16). Many of the film’s critics read its final passage as a literal depiction of the afterlife, which is not necessarily supported within the film, given its extensive prior association with Jack’s perspective. The vision of heaven – to use a reductive term – is intercut throughout the film, showing Jack walking through a barren landscape (**Shot 4.30**). His younger self leads him (**Shot 4.31**) to a beach which is populated by figures from his past (**Shot 4.32**). The space is designated as one of resolution and reconciliation, with Jack coming to peace with his past – his younger self leading him to it strengthens this impression, as it is through reflecting on his past that he comes to this new understanding – and not necessarily one associated with the “objective” reality of an otherworld. The film’s non-linear

editing means that it is possible to interpret its narrative in various ways, but it is significant that Jack's adult self is shown inhabiting the same urban terrain both before and after Malick presents his spiritual vision (**Shot 4.33**). The interpretation of the desert and beach as an internal space would be thematically cohesive with the film's consistent meditation on human relationships to higher powers, instead of an attempt to prove the existence of a higher power. The concluding afterlife sequence is open to multiple interpretations, but Malick suggests an internal space in his continued framing of the film within Jack's perspective.

The final sequence is complicated in that Mrs. O'Brien also accepts R.L.'s death within it. Although the afterlife sequence is ostensibly located within Jack's perspective, it also resolves Mrs. O'Brien's narrative of doubt and suffering. On the beach, Malick shows Mrs. O'Brien tightly holding R.L. (**Shot 4.34**). Shortly after, Malick cuts to a house where Mrs. O'Brien says goodbye to R.L. (**Shot 4.35**), indicating her acceptance of his death. Jack is then shown comforting his mother as R.L. walks away (**Shot 4.36**). The sequence's confluence of perspectives complicates the spectator's conception of it, as it can no longer be confined solely to Jack's perspective. Its imagery also presents the culmination of Mrs. O'Brien's conformity to the way of grace. During her opening narration, Malick cuts to a field of sunflowers when she first mentions the way of grace (**Shot 4.37**). During the afterlife sequence, she says, "I give him to you. I give him my son." Her sentiment is underscored by another shot of a field of sunflowers (**Shot 4.38**), implying that Mrs. O'Brien comes to embody the way of grace in her acceptance of life's hardships. Sterritt interprets the image in a cynical manner:

The film gives us those obedient sunflowers and the dutiful worshippers they symbolise, transfixed by a radiance that out-glows and often veils the horrors of the world, but does not prevent them from recurring no matter how soothingly, suggestively, spellbindingly it shines. ("Days of Heaven and Waco" 57)

The sunflowers do not symbolise worshippers, but the state of grace that can be attained upon accepting the beauty and suffering that exist in equal measure within the world. *The Tree of Life* never reduces life to one mode of existence; it is cruel and unforgiving, but it can also be beautiful and transcendent, with its narrative presenting both of these extremes. Human struggle is depicted as inevitable, often shaking the faith of those suffering, but never precluding the possibility of happiness. *The Tree of Life* suggests that humans are defined by their acceptance or denial of the circumstances that surround them.

The Tree of Life's denouement recalls *The Thin Red Line*'s in its depiction of a character coming to an epiphany about their existence, while simultaneously positioning Jack as the focal point of the film's numerous binaries. The film's final earth-bound shots show Jack standing outside following the afterlife sequence. His mother's voiceover has indicated her acceptance of hardship at some point in the film's non-linear chronology, but the conclusion of Jack's narrative is less decisive. The final shot of Jack shows him beginning to smile (**Shot 4.39**), suggesting a sense of spiritual reconciliation. This is immediately followed by a shot of a bridge over a body of water (**Shot 4.40**). The shot represents nature and grace; the ocean is free-form, accepting its circumstances and reflecting the way of grace, while the bridge rigidly imposes itself onto the landscape around it, reflecting the way of nature. Kilby suggests that *The Tree of Life* can be read "as a meditation on the wholeness of things, on how all things fit together, or if not that, at least on how all things *are* together" (Kilby, Johnson, and Prusak 10). Malick pushes the spectator toward that conclusion with his interweaving of nature and grace, showing how both co-exist and create some kind of balance, even when they clash with each other. These shots locate Jack as the focal point of the film's intermingling binaries: he is associated with both of his parents, nature and grace, creativity and sterility, the natural and cultural worlds, and even more besides. Jack does not come to embody the way of grace as might be expected, instead suggesting that the narrative

has been about Jack accepting himself as a living, contradictory human. It would be reductive to position Jack on one side of any binary – something which is further indicated by shots of the natural world reflected in his otherwise antiseptic office building (**Shot 4.41**) – instead of regarding him as a figure of reconciliation and co-existence of conflicting perspectives.

Hamner captures Jack's complexity in noting the way he is positioned as the "affective and temporal switch-point between eternity and history, between grace and nature" (31). In this context, grace is about accepting not just the circumstances of the world around us, but the complications of human identity itself. Jack is a microcosm for the universe, with the film reflecting his perspective just as much as he reflects it. The film becomes a commentary on how every person is their own universe, containing an infinite number of characteristics. *The Tree of Life* is an elegy for lost life, but it is also a celebration of the universe, the humans – and other species – who inhabit it, and the irreducible complexity present in everyday life.

Conclusion: “One big soul”

Terrence Malick’s work is easily recognisable as an auteur’s – despite a number of longstanding and fruitful collaborations – not only for its aesthetic beauty, but also in its consistent frustration of traditional understandings of gender and genre. The preceding chapters of this thesis have examined Malick’s work within that context. Each chapter has located one of Malick’s films within a specific genre – or genres – before analysing the manner in which the film refuses to conform to genre conventions or traditional gender representations. *Badlands*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The New World*, and *The Tree of Life* are all located within separate genres, but they are united in their consistent denial of traditional satisfaction.

Although Malick’s films can easily be placed within specific genres, each film consistently revises genre conventions. *Badlands* is a hybrid of the crime and road genres, but its images are consistently counterposed against its voiceover narration in order to frustrate spectator pleasure, which is usually the object of those aforementioned genres. *The Thin Red Line* presents a combat film’s narrative through an art film aesthetic. Its structure and narration emphasise the philosophical musings of its central characters – which are delivered through voiceover narration – over the combat narrative. *The New World* can be identified as a biopic due to its adaptation of one of America’s founding myths. Its lack of adherence to history is not a subversion of the genre, as biopics have regularly been noted for their lack of verisimilitude, but its self-conscious mythologising of its own narrative is a rejection of the genre’s usual construction. *The Tree of Life* is a coming-of-age film and family melodrama that features less genre revision than the aforementioned films, but its immense cosmic scope regardless represents a point of difference. The visual aesthetic, story, and structure of Malick’s films repeatedly deny the expectations that cinematic genres generate.

Malick's films are positioned within traditionally male-dominated genres, which has led to a consistent interrogation of the masculine impulses within his films throughout his career. All four of the films have a central male protagonist, which is relatively commonplace within cinematic narratives. However, Malick's films differentiate themselves in their examination of social expectations and the artifice inherent to masculinity. *Badlands'* Kit is presented as lacking any defined identity of his own; instead, he draws traits from iconic figures such as James Dean, Kit Carson and Michel Poiccard. Violence and criminality – which are regularly associated with masculinity in the classical crime film – are complicated by Kit's presentation of himself as a spectacle, which is traditionally a female position. *Badlands'* conception of performative masculinity is continued in *The Thin Red Line*, as its most conventionally masculine character is granted a voiceover in which he admits that his masculine aggression is performed out of necessity. The unity and brotherhood that traditionally drives combat films is also absent, with the vast ensemble of male characters isolated from each other despite their shared insecurities. Malick's rendition of the biopic in *The New World* presents a fictionalised version of John Smith's relationship with Pocahontas, even as it refuses to absolve Smith's colonial actions. *The Tree of Life* subverts the gender representations that regularly define coming-of-age films, locating Jack as the focal point of masculine/paternal action and feminine/maternal reflection. Its nuanced depiction of Jack's father also places his shortcomings and his humanity on display. These four films are united in their tendency to question the construction of masculine identities at the same time as providing spaces for these figures to express their inner perspectives.

Malick's revision of genre conventions is regularly accomplished through the incursion of those perspectives that are regularly excluded within male-dominated genres. *Badlands'* subversions of crime and road movies are derived primarily from its affectless tone, which is itself drawn largely from Holly's voiceover narration. That narration regularly

renders the film's dramatic stakes redundant at the same time as carving out a space for the feminine perspective that is regularly absent from crime films. In that sense, the film can be read as a commentary on the passive role female characters within cinematic narratives – particularly genre films – are relegated to, culminating in the film's final shots, when Holly demonstrates mastery over the film's aural and visual elements. *The Thin Red Line* is most concerned with masculinity and military dehumanisation, but the narration spoken by an American soldier's wife and a Japanese soldier rebukes the centrality of American male perspectives to the combat genre. The incursion of these perspectives forces the viewer to consider those experiences outside of the genre's usual purview, complicating the spectator's identification with the American soldiers at the narrative's centre. *The New World* distributes its screen time and voiceover narration between Pocahontas and Smith, before his departure and subsequent absence reveal Pocahontas as the narrative's centre. The transition to a central female perspective midway through the film is a major departure within Malick's oeuvre, which previously centred its narrative action on masculine figures, regardless of the aforementioned female viewpoints. Pocahontas's status as a Native American woman is key to Malick's narrative, which demonstrates the colonial oppression she faces because of her marginalised identity, while simultaneously focusing on her immense reserves of inner strength. *The Tree of Life* largely views Mrs. O'Brien through the lens of Jack's perspective, but she and her husband are presented as equals in terms of their influence over their son. Further, the film undermines any nostalgia that the 1950s period might generate by depicting Mrs. O'Brien's struggles within the patriarchal family and social structure in which she is enmeshed. Malick's films self-consciously deconstruct women's traditional roles as they are commonly represented within genre narratives, stylistically enforcing equality through voiceover and point of view even as the story showcases oppression.

When viewed as a whole, the most significant aspect of Malick's oeuvre is its consistent embodiment of multiple subjective perspectives. Within the worldview presented in Malick's oeuvre, humans are inextricable from each other and the world around them. That element is least prominent within *Badlands*, which only employs Holly as a narrator. However, her narration and diegetic interactions with Kit demonstrate the vast gulfs between their perspectives. *The Thin Red Line* features voiceover narration from a number of characters, several of whom are difficult to distinguish in visual and aural terms. That conflation of perspectives supports Malick's evocation of "one big soul" in its presentation of characters as representative of a spectrum of human experiences and beliefs. The contradictory perspectives that the narrative showcases are simultaneously embodied and questioned, indicating the complexity of Malick's structure of identification. *The New World* functions in a similar manner, presenting its characters' fantasies at the same time as foregrounding their naiveté. For instance, Pocahontas and Smith's romance can be understood simultaneously through the lovers' seemingly boundless desire for each other and the colonial landscape that surrounds them, which is almost obscured through the intensely aestheticised presentation of their infatuation. *The Tree of Life* is Malick's most explicit evocation of perspective, locating its narrative largely within Jack's memory of his childhood while still allowing for the embodiment of external perspectives. These films all present a solipsistic universe in which diverse perspectives may coexist, yet are impossible to fully understand in their totality.

Malick's films are rightly celebrated for their aesthetic beauty, but their subversion of traditional representations of gender, genre, and history has largely been neglected. The director's location of his narratives within their characters' subjective perspectives allows for a nuanced consideration – and revision – of genre conventions, and how they have served to reinforce hegemonic ideologies. *The Thin Red Line*'s musing on the possibility of "one big

soul [that] everyone's a part of" is especially compelling after extensive consideration of Malick's oeuvre, which has grown progressively more rigorous in its consideration of human struggle and experience.

Appendix

Shot 1.1



Shot 1.2



Shot 1.3



Shot 1.4



Shot 1.5



Shot 1.6



Shot 1.7



Shot 1.8



Shot 1.9



Shot 1.10



Shot 1.11



Shot 1.12



Shot 1.13



Shot 1.14



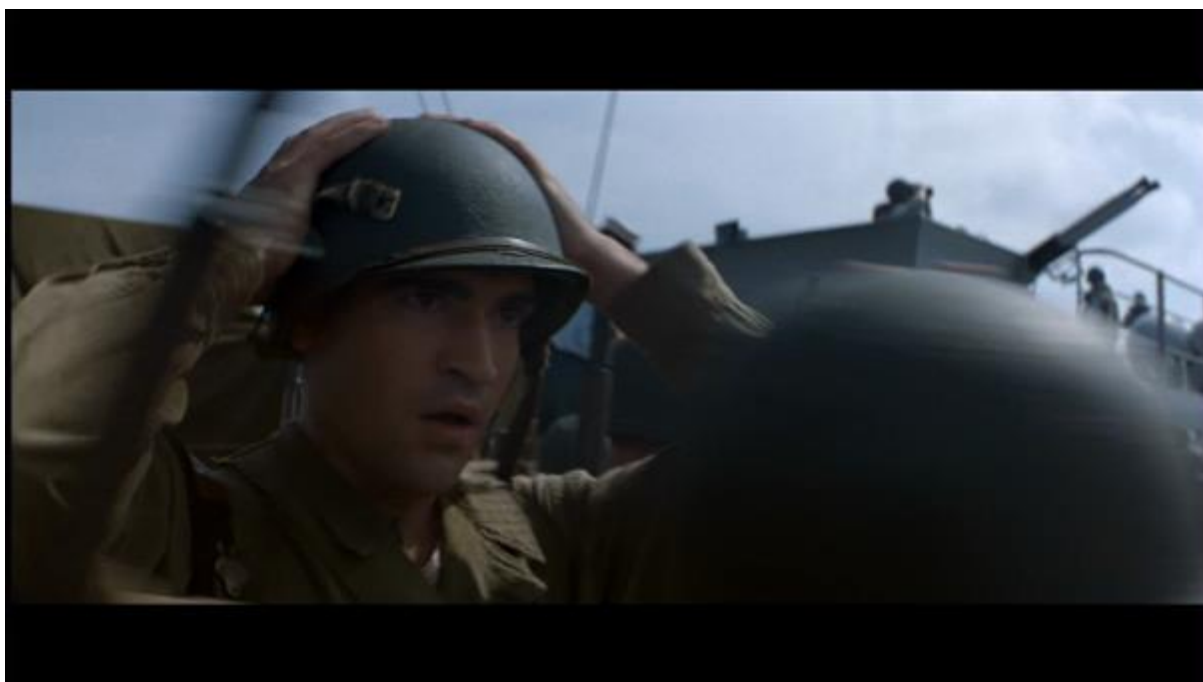
Shot 2.1



Shot 2.2



Shot 2.3



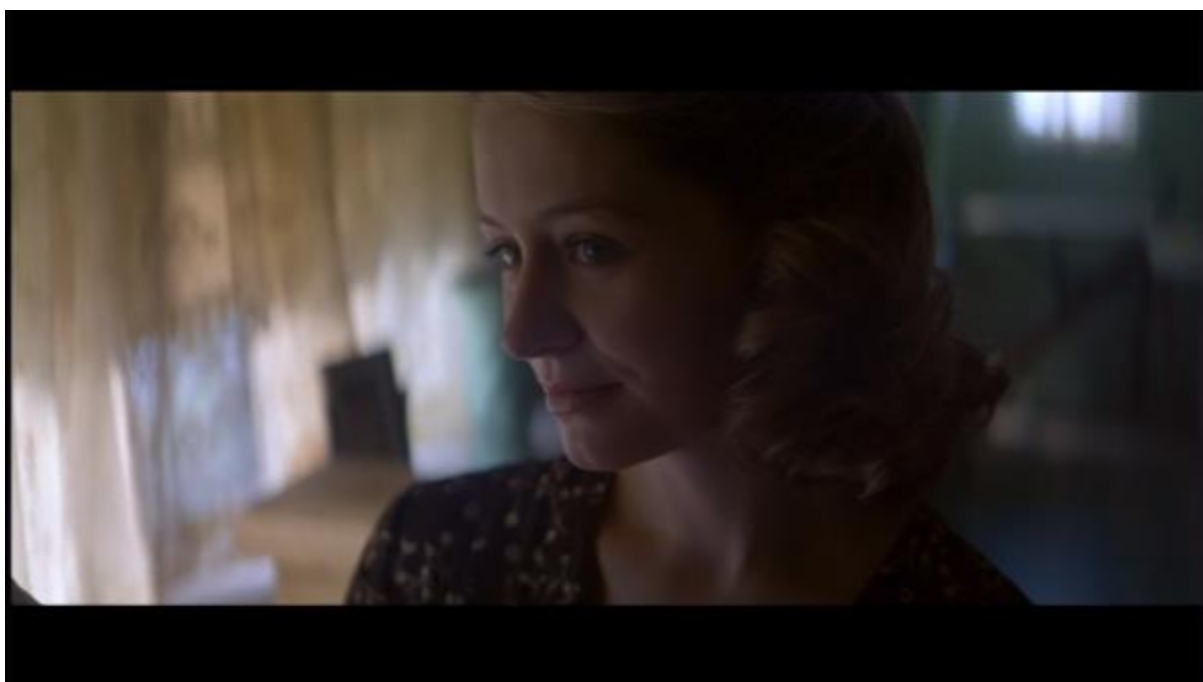
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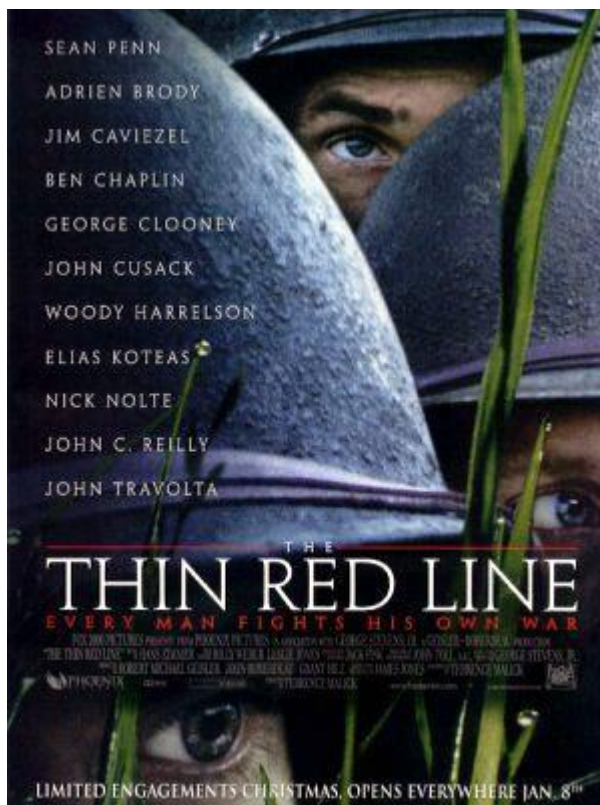


Shot 2.5



Shot 2.6



Shot 2.7Shot 2.8

Shot 2.9



Shot 2.10



Shot 2.11



Shot 2.12



Shot 2.13



Shot 2.14



Shot 2.15



Shot 2.16



Shot 2.17



Shot 2.18



Shot 2.19



Shot 2.20



Shot 2.21



Shot 2.22



Shot 2.23



Shot 2.24



Shot 2.25



Shot 2.26



Shot 2.27



Shot 2.28



Shot 2.29



Shot 2.30



Shot 2.31



Shot 3.1



Shot 3.2



Shot 3.3



Shot 3.4



Shot 3.5



Shot 3.6



Shot 3.7



Shot 3.8



Shot 3.9



Shot 3.10



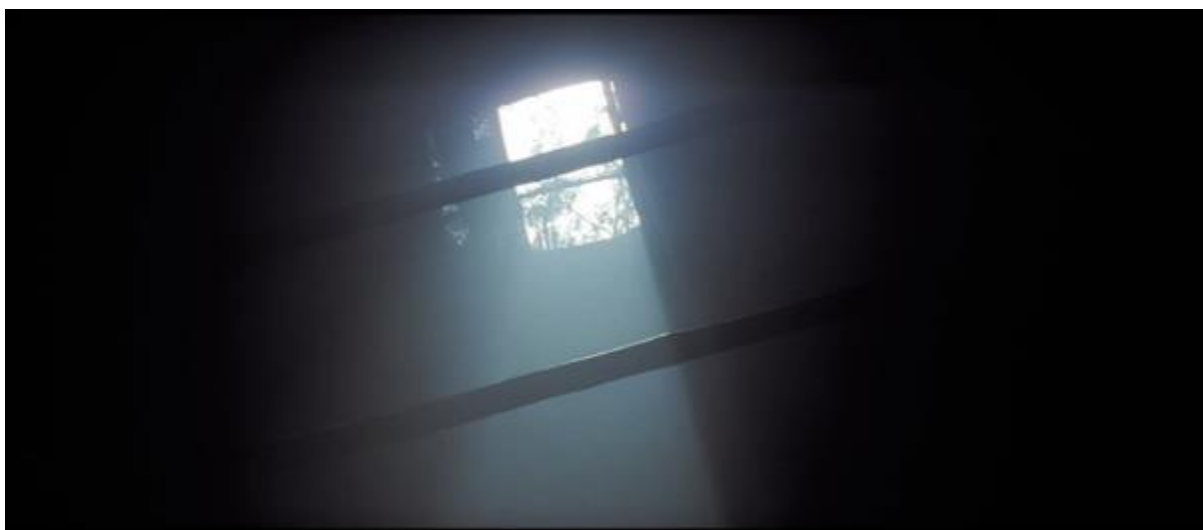
Shot 3.11



Shot 3.12



Shot 3.13



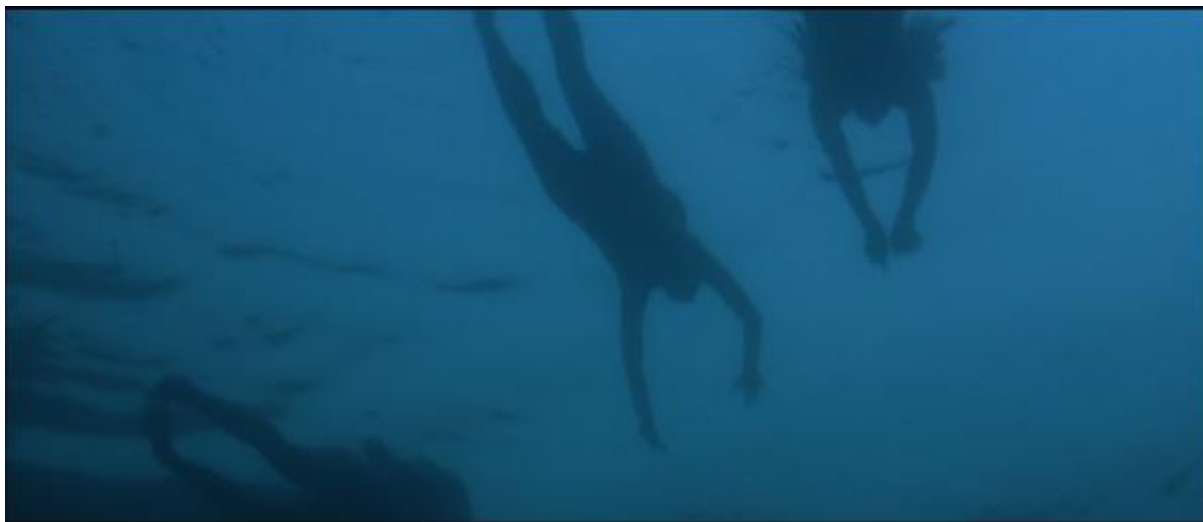
Shot 3.14



Shot 3.15



Shot 3.16



Shot 3.17



Shot 3.18



Shot 3.19



Shot 3.20



Shot 3.21



Shot 3.22



Shot 3.23



Shot 3.24



Shot 3.25



Shot 3.26



Shot 3.27



Shot 3.28



Shot 3.29



Shot 3.30



Shot 3.31



Shot 3.32



Shot 3.33



Shot 3.34



Shot 3.35



Shot 3.36



Shot 3.37



Shot 3.38



Shot 4.1



Shot 4.2



Shot 4.3**Shot 4.4**

Shot 4.5



Shot 4.6



Shot 4.7



Shot 4.8



Shot 4.9



Shot 4.10



Shot 4.11



Shot 4.12



Shot 4.13



Shot 4.14



Shot 4.15



Shot 4.16



Shot 4.17



Shot 4.18



Shot 4.19



Shot 4.20



Shot 4.21



Shot 4.22



Shot 4.23



Shot 4.24



Shot 4.25



Shot 4.26



Shot 4.27



Shot 4.28



Shot 4.29



Shot 4.30



Shot 4.31



Shot 4.32



Shot 4.33



Shot 4.34



Shot 4.35



Shot 4.36



Shot 4.37



Shot 4.38



Shot 4.39



Shot 4.40



Shot 4.41



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